

BOOK OF GARGOYLES



by Jane Wodening

Preface by Lucia Berlin

BOOK
OF
GARGOYLES

By Jane Wodening

Jane Wodening

Baksun/Grackle

Copyright 1999 by Jane Wodening

ISBN # 1-887997-14-8

Published by

Baksun Books of Boulder, Colorado

Grackle Books of Nederland, Colorado

Other books by Jane Wodening:

LUMP GULCH TALES

MOUNTAIN WOMAN TALES

FROM THE BOOK OF LEGENDS

THE INSIDE STORY

MOON SONGS

PREFACE

By Lucia Berlin

In the introduction to this book Jane Wodening refers to these stories as having been “too sad, too ugly or too grotesque” to include in other collections. Gargoyles.

The only gargoyles I knew, I mean didn’t look up at from the ground, were the gargoyles on the roof-top of Notre Dame. Grotesque decorations to cover rain-pipes. (The word itself comes from throat and to gargle) Those gargoyles seemed to me like a graffiti writer’s tag, a coda added after years and years of painstaking work on a cathedral of majestic beauty. They were ugly, but beautiful too, with a rakish power, their wings and tongues silhouetted against the Paris sky.


Jane Wodening’s stories are sad and grotesque and powerful. Painful stories, from a beetle’s terrible tribulations to blizzards and floods and heartache.

Kurosawa said, “To be an artist means never having to avert one’s eyes.” Jane Wodening doesn’t blink.

Each story attests to the absolute clarity and patience of her observation, whether it is of the mother of an accused murderer, the flush on that boy’s cheeks, or the devastating dilemma of the writer who has felt the most passionate of kisses and cannot describe it.

Because of their clarity, these stories seem etched in stone. We are shown the ugly, but it is depicted with beauty. “(the dead man’s) face blissful and relaxed, haloed by the brain splattered on the wall.” Each story is tempered with a Chekhovian freedom from judgement. Whether it is Esta’s need to properly bury her dog or a mother trying to comfort her dying daughter with a pitcher of Tang, Wodening’s respect for her characters leaves us with an intimate sense of a dignity in us all.

Few authors today write with such strength and compassion. These stories stand out, strange and awesome, like winged gargoyles against the sky.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

FOREWORD

Some of these stories have been published separately in various periodicals, most particularly in *ROLLING STOCK*. Some have never been published before. All of them are from years ago.

Except for "Beetle" and "Burying Badger," these were all given to me, mostly like the Ancient Mariner gave his story to the wedding guest. I don't really relate to them. However, like the wedding guest, I feel almost morally obliged, since I have come this far and actually written them down, to present them somehow. In compiling my earlier collections of stories, I would consider some of these, but then I would reject them again. For quite a number of years I have tried to limit myself to just happy things — happy music and happy views of things, and beauty. Always these stories seemed too sad, too ugly or too grotesque to include. And so, when I looked to put together another volume of stories, there these all were at the bottom of the barrel, and it seemed that in each other's company, they could come out and face the light of day.

-- by Jane Wodening, March, 1999

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BEETLE	9
WYOMING WILLIE	13
THE KISS	23
JUDGMENT AT LEADVILLE	27
BUT A CHILD NEEDS HER	39
BIOGRAPHY OF A SPY	47
PHONE CALL: THE SIXTIES	57
BURYING BADGER	61
LETTER FROM THE LANDLADY	71
A LIFE	75
DRIVING UP THROUGH MEXICO	79

BEETLE

I was talking with Betsy on the phone, fiddling, as one does, with the spiraled cord, poking absently at the dust collected on the dial and at the stack of books on the footlocker which serves as a telephone table, when I saw a little gray beetle clinging to the top edge of a book.

“I won’t be able to come up tomorrow either,” Betsy was saying, “Beth has this endless cough.”

I mumbled something about how insidious the latest flu was. What was a beetle doing here in February? Where could it have come from? Had it been in the house all this time? Had it perhaps been wintering over in some obscure crack and then gotten disturbed by the Saturday morning cleaning? How could it expect to gain sustenance on the telephone table?

“But I’m definitely counting on Wednesday. It’s been three weeks since we’ve had a proper Wednesday.”

I reached out to the beetle, trying to get it to walk onto my hand. It seems to be getting hard for me to get a clear view of insects these days. So helpful if they get on my hand so I can arrange the distance and the light to suit my needs.

“Okay, I’ll see you Wednesday for sure,” I said. Placing the receiver on its cradle, I touched the beetle gently. Instantly, it loosed its hold on the book and hung there by a cobweb looking like an empty shell, a long-dead little beetle, relic of a spider’s gluttony, long forgotten. Possum. There are many insects who play possum. I’ve seen it many times before. Spiders themselves do it often. I had never seen it quite so convincingly done, though, as this beetle achieved it. Dark gray, covered with dust, hanging shriveled and inconsequential in a cobweb. I was taken aback.

I reassured myself that I had been extremely gentle and couldn’t possibly have hurt the little creature and, with a faint hope that she might be interested in eating some of my aphids, I resolved to carry her up to the greenhouse on the roof. “Maybe she’s hungry,” I muttered to myself hopefully. I imagined that she was a female in hopes that she would populate the greenhouse with aphid-eaters.

Carefully, I picked up the book and stood up. The cobweb must have been attached to something else, for the beetle fell with a slight sound to the floor as I stood and I saw her lying on her back, waving her legs feebly in the air. I stooped down with my book, gently slid the paper cover under her and picked her up. She rolled down it to the inside, the great squashing maw between the cover and the title page. I put my finger in there to hold the book open, went out into the snow and up the icy ladder to the greenhouse carrying the book and its precious cargo. Somehow I got through the door and into the greenhouse without dropping her, then looked around for the best source of aphids to place her on. I settled on the young Greek bean plant, just setting out its real leaves although it was a foot high already. These were compound leaves, each with three newly opening leaflets. Carefully, I spread out the book. She was there and she was on her feet, crawling slowly across the page. I placed the tender young leaf in front of her but she changed course to avoid it. She certainly mistrusted me. It

seemed she had it in her mind to go to the edge of the page. I put the book so that the leaf was just below the end of the book in a line with the direction of her course. She came to it and stopped, waving her antennae in intense interest for awhile while I tried to hold still.

The leaf passed muster and she slowly pulled herself onto it. There was an aphid there but she walked past it, not seeming to notice. She looked old and withered and frail. "Maybe she needs water," I thought.

I stuck my finger in the barrel of water near the Greek bean and let a drop fall on the other leaflet where it curled, barely open, beside her. The blow shook the young bean like an earthquake. I watched with concern as the beetle slid and clung to the underside of the leaf. She seemed, however, to know how to cling to a leaf. Ancestry, no doubt, little hairs or microscopic suction cups. I watched with relief as she climbed delicately back up on the top edge of the leaflet. Then I saw her notice the pool of water contained in the other one beside her. Hastily, eagerly, she stretched herself across the gap, clinging still with one back leg to her original leaflet, curling her four front legs around the edge of the one holding the pool of water. The other back leg waved frantically in the air, scrabbling thoughtlessly for some purchase where it could help to hold her body in balance as she bent with her mouth solemnly still against the water. That back leg was the only part of her that moved as she absorbed the water in passionate immobility.

For long minutes I watched her as she drank and drank, watched her unattached leg gradually calm down, then jerk occasionally with rapturous satisfaction. Her shriveled body swelled, her thorax stretched forward, her head reached out, her abdomen filled. As she at last walked away from the water, her color had changed from dark dull gray to warm brown. Spots of gold appeared on her thorax, her chin turned to a luminous maroon. The under part of her abdomen which had a few minutes before been drab and dusty was now a beautiful blend

of tan and pale olive. She who had been frail before now walked in glowing golden strength.

She went purposefully to the top of the little vine where the second pair of real leaves was in bud and I watched carefully as she explored it, looking, no doubt, for higher and bushier reaches where she could lose herself in greenery. Her antennae were going constantly. She stopped to clean a bit of something white off of one front foot. She had an awful struggle with it, scrabbling at it with her mandibles and her antenna. At last she got it off her foot but it was then stuck on her antenna. She worked away at that for awhile then, pulling it down through her mandibles again and again. I feared for her antenna but I needn't have. She finally got rid of the thing at last, gave up the effort to find a way further up the beanstalk and walked down the long stretch of stem to where the big seedling leaves came out.

She stopped there and I craned and peered at her, trying to see what she was doing. There were newly hatched aphids there and she was among them. I don't know if she was eating them or not. I couldn't get a proper angle to see her mouth to be sure. After a while, she went on down to the ground. She blended wonderfully with the soil, walking with sure steps over pebbles and under pine needles, until she was lost to view.



WYOMING WILLIE

“My third grade teacher felt it was time I learned to read. She got me to come in to school a half-hour early, stay a half-hour late, she couldn’t do anything. My fourth grade teacher asked me, ‘Why don’t you learn to read?’ I said, ‘My horse don’t care if I know how to read.’ Now, my Dad was running the general store back there in Fremont county and she knew I didn’t have a horse but she said, ‘There are a lot of books about horses. If you want to learn how to take good care of your horse, you will want to be able to read those books.’ So I learned to read in fourth grade.

“Then my rich grandpa died and time I was a senior in high school, I had eighty acres, a hundred fifty head of cattle and my Dad and I were in partnership buying and selling high-quality bulls. Got us another eighty acres, another hundred forty head, then we thought we’d go into cows. Things went bad then. I was in college studying animal husbandry and Dad was in charge. Then my mother died and six months later Dad and I went bankrupt. We’d been real close up till then but there was forty thousand bucks missing and he never told me why. He ruined himself and me is what he did, too, but I come

out smelling like a rose, yessir, I come out smelling like a rose. He threw away half my life's work but I can forgive him now. I don't hate him; I just don't have a whole lot to say to him.

"His new wife, she thinks the world and all of him and they're happy as larks. She tries to tell me what a swell guy he is but she don't know him like I do. It couldn't have been gambling. He's real straight-laced and never gambled in his life except the cattle, of course. Must've been blackmail, something like that.

"I used to be as prejudiced as they come, cowboys tend to be prejudiced, especially against hippies. I had a lot of fun back in college fighting with the hippies. That was great.

"But there was one hippy changed all that. I got my tire in a hole in a parking lot and I couldn't get out. It was undignified. I was working away at it, getting nowhere, and I saw this hippy walking over toward me. I tensed up, almost got out of the car to fight him right there but he waved and went to the back of the car and pushed me out. I looked around to see what he'd do then. He'd got mud on him from pushing me but he smiled and waved and walked off. That hippy has saved about a thousand hippies from me. From that moment I don't pigeonhole people; I think of each one as individuals.

"Well, I come out of being bankrupted smelling like a rose but I couldn't afford to go back to college so I got drafted into Nam.

"I went and saw this movie a while ago. Everyone said it was close to the real thing, how it really was in Nam and it sure was, though we were armored so it wasn't like the movie in that way. But one part, they were going down this canal, the gooks shot everyone up. That happened to me too. It's rough when guys you've been living with for a year and count as friends suddenly blow up in your face, guts flying around, arms, legs, a head. When I went in I was a good shot and as it

happened I was the first guy in our outfit to kill a gook. Boy, I couldn't wait to go down there and cut off his ears. Time I got out though I wasn't near a good shot, end up just throwing lots of lead into the jungle. Never have been a good shot since then.

"Wasn't long into that movie, my stomach was in a godawful knot and I had an imaginary machine gun I was mowing them down with. Shaking, teeth chattering. I'm all over it now but for a couple of weeks after that I was having nightmares every night. I drove the tank mostly over there and whenever we got a prisoner the thing to do was lay him on the ground and drive up the tank to his head. Then if he says he won't talk, drive up another inch or so. I never did have to run over any heads but I sure got close a few times. I didn't like it at all but I think I would have done it if I'd got the order. I really think I'd have done it. I'm not sure but I think I would have.

"Prettiest thing I've ever seen was a fire fight across the way. It's an awful thing to live through or die in but beautiful to watch different colors of flames dancing about all across the mountain. I'm glad it was guys I didn't know over there.

"There was one time when I and one gook were in an area and we couldn't both leave, just one of us. I didn't like it much. The problem was, of course, the first one to be spotted by the other one dies. Sort of like a game, win or lose all. I wouldn't want to be in that position again. Finally after a godawful long time I realized he had to be in a certain area. I'd been thinking gun or even bayonet but then I pulled out a grenade and threw it in there and that was that. I didn't go in to look.

"We had to run every morning after doing our daily dozen. You're supposed to do these dozen calisthenics a dozen times each, well we did them a hundred. We got in such good shape we'd run everywhere we went, the airborne run, little short steps, really go fast, and endurance! I was smoking two packs

a day and never felt near as good before or since as I did then. We'd run everywhere, messages, reveille, didn't think nothing of going ten miles to town.

"You couldn't trust any of those gooks, even on our side. There was one gook bitch we called Aunt Fanny, she ran the girls in town; everyone knew her well, of course. She come into camp one day, a guy come up to her to see what she wanted or whatever, she pulled out a knife and slashed him across the middle. He jumped back in time, only got a cut across the stomach; one of the sentries mowed her down with his machine gun. Nobody ever figured out what her complaint was.

"I was the first one of my outfit to get home alive, it was because I broke my back. But it wasn't right at all because it wasn't a war wound. It was a road accident. I wasn't driving, this other guy was driving too fast and hit a rock, rolled the jeep, and I flew out and landed on a stump. There wasn't a gook for miles. If it had been a war wound I might have felt okay about it but it wasn't. I felt terribly that those guys needed me and I had up and left them. It was awful. I tried six times to go back in but they never would let me go. Six times I tried, but they wouldn't let me go.

"Well, so I got out of there and decided to finish up college.

"I got a good high-paying indoor job after I graduated but I can't stand being cooped up, air conditioning in the summer, heated in the winter, I was going crazy. That's when I got the job in Sweetwater County. Boy, that job couldn't be beat. Lived in a mansion, all the meat we wanted free, beautiful country, fine cattle, and practically my own boss. It was wonderful country, top of the world.

"I think my best friend in Sweetwater County was a hippy named Tim. He and I worked together for a couple years. He was a good man even though he was a hippy, worked as hard

as any cowboy did. When my back would give me trouble, he'd fix it in a few seconds. Lived in a little place out back and was always having women visitors, sometimes as many as three and four at a time. Never saw anything like it. He had a sense of humor that was amazing. Great guy, he was a great guy. He finally went off to Canada to start a commune. He talked with me a lot about it before he went. Not one of those places with a common kitchen and all that, just neighbors, good neighbors. I've always wanted to go up there but there's no money in living in a commune. I need money, as much as I can get.

"That job in Sweetwater County was the kind of life I wanted to lead. Lots of space, the finest cattle you could find for hundreds of miles, streams and plenty of wildlife to chase around. I got into trapping there. I tell you that is fun, battling wits with badgers and beavers, cover my scent with calves blood and grease, sweep over my tracks with branches, use the foot of yesterday's kill to make tracks over the trap.

"Some of the funnest times I ever had were with my friend Jerry, roping coyotes. Coyotes are smart all right but we'd chase that little bugger down then we'd both rope it and then pull it apart. That was before we learned how much a pelt is worth. After that we did it different. I'd rope the coyote then run my horse over by a tree and whap! Snap it on the tree. Man, that is fun! And no holes in the pelt.

"One time me and my friend Tim were driving along the road and I saw a roadkill whiz by and after a bit I said to Tim, 'Wasn't that a fox?' 'Well,' he said, 'I was just thinking it was a fox,' so I stopped and backed up and it sure was, smashed and tore up, took me an hour to skin out, more time to sew it up. I didn't think it was hardly worth it but I took it down and showed the guy, showed him my stitching, told him it was a road kill and all. I didn't know what he'd say but I didn't expect what he did say, 'Seventy-five dollars!' I just stood there for a second. Then I said, 'That's fine.'

“Another time Jerry and I smoked out a den of fox kits. We did it right, blew kerosene smoke in one hole, out the other hole come the mother, sneezing and coughing and glaring at us. Boy, she was mad! Whapped a gunny sack over the hole and in it jumped the kits, six of them. There was a big stink in the paper. ‘FOX KILLERS SLAY SIX.’ All the town dudes had been coming out to see the mother promenade her cute little babies every afternoon so the whole town hated us. Didn’t say in the paper who did it though. We sold them kits to the Sheriff’s Deputy for fifty bucks apiece. That’s three hundred for about half-hour’s work. The Deputy raised them for a couple months, skinned them out and probably got over a thousand for them. Real nice for everyone. Even the mother got away.

“One time I got a tape of dying rabbit, twenty minutes of continuously dying rabbit. You know how they sound when they’re dying, sort of like a baby crying. Well, I got up about two in the morning, packed up my tape recorder and a little speaker and my gun and headed out to a place I knew where I’d seen coyote tracks, a big meadow with a little rise, nice big tree on it. Built me a blind up against that tree in the dark, put the speaker about twenty feet away with the tape recorder beside me in the blind then leaned back and smoked my pipe until dawn. Soon as it started to light up, I turned on the tape, didn’t take five minutes there was a coyote circling around me. He paced and circled and doubled back and I waited. Seemed like that coyote knew what the range of my gun was and he was keeping out of it. Soon as the tape run out, that little feller pointed, nose forward, and tail straight out behind, one forefoot raised under his chest. I never saw anything that good in pointing outside of a purebred pointing dog. It was a perfect point.

“Well, I rewound that tape as fast as I could, him pointing the whole time, then I turned it on again. When I did that, the coyote crouched down in the grass and started to crawl toward me on his belly. By this time there was half a dozen ravens had gathered and they were circling around above me. I raised my

rifle real slow as the coyote crawled into my range and I slid it through one of the slits in the blind. The ravens must have seen the glint of it in the sun even though I had it stuck out all of about an inch but they set up an awful squawking and flew away fast. The coyote sprung up I swear five feet in the air turning as he jumped, I never saw anything like it, and he landed running like hellfire across the meadow.

“Calving was real hard. Those old cows would drop their calves in the oddest places, on a rock or into a puddle or a thicket a coon couldn’t get into to lick it off. I didn’t like it when they died, didn’t like it at all. It wasn’t because I cared about them, nothing personal, it was my reputation. Honor. I wanted to do a good job, be the best, and bring in a lot of money.

“Calving time I’d ride out constantly checking up on the cows. Seems like we’d get some bad weather, snow, wind, blinding sleet and there they’d be bellowing in every field, especially at night. Nobody sleeps calving time if they want to make money off of cows. One time I went out, real nice little bull calf out of our best cow, it was wind and sleet but that little bugger was sucking good so I thought I’d check on this other cow further off that was due. Cold night, like to froze. This other cow, she’d dropped her calf and it was thrashing around, couldn’t get up, so I put it across my saddle and headed back to take them to the barn, went past the other cow with the handsome little bull calf to pick them up. When they’ve sucked, supposed to be they’ll be all right. I hadn’t been gone more than half hour, looked over, there he was lying on the ground dead and stiff as a doornail, froze to the ground. Bothered me a lot that kind of thing. That’s where getting into cows is such a big gamble, if the weather’s bad, that’s when they’re going to drop ‘em and then they die and your year’s money’s gone. A cattleman can be ruined by one good blizzard at the right time.

“We had lots of trouble with dogs too. Any dog I see on the property I shoot it, even if it isn’t paying attention to the cattle, matter of principle, no dogs allowed, that’s all. And any

dog I see wandering around at night, no matter where, I shoot him. I don't sanction packs. Packs are the worst thing about dogs. And it's at night they pack up most.

"One neighbor, I liked him a lot, still do, but his dog come over once and was chasing the horses around the corral. So I caught him and took him over there and told my neighbor he'd better tie up his dog because it was chasing my horses and if I saw that dog again on my property I'd shoot it. And he said he understood and he sure would tie up his dog. Next afternoon there was that dog again in my corral and I shot it, tossed it in the back of the truck and took it to him, ready for a fight. But he took one look at it, said, 'Daggone, I forgot to tie him up!' and that was that. We're still friends.

"There was one time I didn't tell anyone though. This other neighbor had bought a five hundred dollar coon dog and wasn't anyone prouder than that man was of that hound. Well, he took him out first time hunting coon and that four-star coon dog got lost. They looked and hollered all night long for that thing. Early in the morning I saw him out in the pasture barking at the cattle so I shot him. That guy looked and looked for weeks for that dog but I wasn't about to admit to killing no five hundred dollar dog.

"I've got a little dog now, Spot, he's a devil. He's part pit bull. All I have to do is I say, 'Go get'm, Dog,' and off he goes like a bullet. He can beat any dog around. Except there was one time he lost. That was a big Malamute-police dog mix that came on our property when I was at work. My neighbor went out and hit the big dog over the head with a shovel and sent him out of there but Spot was about dead, all tore up, lot of blood all over the ground. Took him two weeks to recover. I didn't take him to the vet for that one, nossir. I'd take him if I'd have sicked him on that other dog but if the dog decides to do something on his own he's got to pay for it on his own. That's only fair. Two weeks later Spot went back to that other dog and killed him; didn't get a scratch.

“If I had my choice, I’d be a mountain man back before the settlers came. I don’t like a lot of people around, I like space. I’d as soon never go to town again. Towns make me nervous, people irritate me; I can’t even find my way around in a town. I get up early every day and work past dark, I don’t like to sit around, don’t like to be indoors.

“There are three things a cowboy can’t take, one is if you insult his wife, another is if you insult his horse and the third is if you touch his hat. One time I put my hat down on a fence for a minute and my brother picked it up and put it on his head. I couldn’t help it; I got this rage in my gut. I didn’t fight him, I didn’t, but I don’t want anyone to touch my hat. This hat fits me, fits my head, and if anybody puts it on they mess up the shape of it. If they touch it they put their fingerprints on it. It’s not the same thing with my boots. My brother’s wore my boots several times, didn’t bother me a bit. It’s just the hat; I don’t want anyone to touch my hat.



THE KISS

If he had stopped to think about it or had been asked, Raymond would have said unequivocally that he was a passionate creature roiling with feelings. He would even have insisted with some force that, since he was a novelist, feelings, being his stock in trade, were something he knew like the back of his hand and understood deeply in every moment of his life.

But the fact was that the System being what it was, he had been three weeks in New York City, his first visit to the United States, without having had or at least acknowledged to others or even to himself, any feelings whatsoever. It was business, sly intellect, salesmanship; it was the play for big dollars. In such activities, feelings are detrimental. Everywhere there were well-lit hallways, huge desks, impressive views of the city, firm handshakes, elegant suits, computers, and steely eyes.

He had a suite of rooms in one of the best hotels. This had at first pleased him but now it was the smooth cover of a computer and he was an anonymous chip. He was preparing to spend the rest of the day in his room, organizing his papers

and his figures to face the committee the next morning.

There was a knock on the door. Raymond opened it. The figure before him was a man, small, old, shabby, eyes twinkling, crooked teeth enhancing a joyous smile. He had met this old man once. He was the father of Raymond's research consultant.

"Come on," was all the old man said. Raymond admitted to an emotion at this moment. Hope. Without a moment's hesitation, Raymond went.

The old man knew very little English but as they rode the subway, he managed to convey that he had been in America five years and that he was taking Raymond to his home in "Little Poland" for dinner. It was a long, long way and the whole long way, Raymond thought this lovely old man might be kidnapping him but even then, he didn't want to go back.

It was nearly the end of the line when they climbed the stairs in a squalid neighborhood. "You are very welcome!" the old man said, beaming, waving his arms. As they climbed the creaking narrow stairs smelling of cabbage, Raymond wondered briefly if he mightn't have made a mistake to come but as they went through the door, he was reassured. Sweet, joyous beaming smiles, delicious smells coming from the stove, the bottle of vodka. Several people were there; they knew some English. And the chatter and laughter, the humanity, was what Raymond needed; the warmth and the vodka ran through his body to his toes and fingertips and he felt shaky, as though he had been dying of thirst, didn't really know it, was given water to drink, and only then realized that he had been dying.

Beside him at the kitchen table was sitting an amazingly, grotesquely, fat woman who ate all the time but spoke with depth and intelligence, startling him with her sensitivity between bites. Sometimes she would touch his hand with hers for a moment and tell him how much she knew about him, psychic

things. "I see green rolling hills," she said once and he moaned, recalling the many happy walks he had taken in childhood through the green rolling hills of Australia where he was raised. Her voice was low but powerful, warm and bubbling with feeling. It was impossible to know her age, she may have been thirty or fifty, but her fat bulged in monstrous lumps and billows. Remarkable eyes were nearly hidden behind her cheeks, which puffed in multiple ridges across her face. And always, constantly, she was eating. When she had to go to the bathroom, it took two men to help her out of her chair and across the room.

The vodka flowed, a delicious dinner was served and eaten; the talk, the laughter, the sparkling eyes, the enthusiasm, the joy and the warmth poured into Raymond with a love of life and of humanity that he realized he had lost touch with. "I must never lose this," he thought.

Finally it was time to go and with regret and gratitude, he embraced these dear people, coming at the last to the enormous grotesque woman. For a moment he hesitated over her, wondering among all the bulbous fat, where on such a face to plant a kiss. Then she raised her lips to him in a gesture so passionate that he rocked back with the force of it. But bravely he kissed her there, on the lips, and felt through them the wild raging flames of her lifetime's accumulated lust, unanswered, unsatiated, endlessly frustrated, and far from abated. Emotions battled within him like an explosion — loathing of her repellent monstrousness fought fiercely but hopelessly against his own ungovernable and horrifying sexual response to the most madly seductive kiss he had ever experienced. A frenzy of adoration washed through him for the glorious fire of life in her. She was the right and wrong of humanity, the distilled truth of civilization. She was the Venus of Willendorf reincarnate, all the sexuality of woman compressed into one ravenous pair of lips. Then pity rose in him like an orgasm and he nearly cried out in sympathy with the hopeless anguish of this woman's frustration.

It couldn't have lasted more than a very few seconds. Raymond wrenched himself away and out the door, groped stumbling down the stairs, staggered drunkenly along the street and into the subway where he sank into a seat and cried and cried for miles.

"I must write this up," he said. "I know something now, something big. That woman told me everything. Enormous things. I have only to write it all down!" It felt to him that a mountain of spiritual depths had entered his soul through that kiss. Often he would sit staring into his computer, wondering how to start. Then he would start, would type madly for a while, then read it, and then remove it from the screen and stare some more. "Well, if she told me so much, what was it?" he finally asked himself. Then, after a long pause, he said aloud, "If it can't be put into words, did anything happen?"



JUDGMENT AT LEADVILLE

“A couple of weeks before, we were talking to Joyce at Campbell’s Grocery store and she was saying that the trial was to be on the third of June and we decided probably everyone who was going to be called to the jury would have been notified by then and we didn’t have to worry anymore. What a relief that was and we said how we’d get off anyway because we knew the family and all, no problem. Then I was plowing through the mail over a sandwich at The Corner and this little innocuous post card to me, “Greetings,” it said and it was one of those stamps where they say your library book is overdue or we have the merchandise you ordered. “Greetings.” (It was smudged, too.) “You Are Hereby Summoned By The District Court” (Honestly, every word was capitalized without a single exception.) “To Be And Appear At The Courthouse, Leadville, Colo. On June 3, 1986,” (and here, I could see where the stamp said 1982 but it was written over in red pencil to say 1986) “At The Hour Of 8:30 A. M. To Serve Therein As A Petit Juror And Herein Fail Not Under Penalty Of Law,” and where it should be signed, it said, “Jury Commissioner.” And that was it. Well, I thought, a little pee-waddling card like that couldn’t be the big trial, anyway it said Petit and even with a capital P, that means small, so it had to be that they were going to do a traffic violation or two in the morning and start the trial in the

afternoon. I think that's a nice example of what they call "denial."

"I got there and it was packed and that's when I thought it must be the trial and when I got into the Courthouse and there was a line all down the hall to the Courtroom, then I was sure. I joined the line and we were all chattering about it. Two hundred people were being brought in as jurors, a hundred each day. At the end of the hall was the old bailiff with a crooked lip and he was checking off the names, peering nearsightedly at a long list. At the courtroom door there were armed men in green uniforms and the lady who works with the bailiff. One of the armed men had a metal detector, he was sweeping it over everyone who went in that door and everyone had to stop and put their hands up and get gone over with the metal detector. Before I got to the bailiff, along came Bob and Susan, Oh, God, they walked down the hall past all of us in line and never looked at anyone, they looked scared and miserable and they walked with their eyes on the wall above the top of the line and I stared at them, all the chatter fell out of me and I stared.

"Three or four years ago Bob and Susan and their three kids had moved away from our gulch. Bob couldn't get enough money as a contractor living up here, so they had moved to town. We were sorry to see them go, they were nice neighbors and it was a good thing to be able to go over there and talk to Susan on rare occasions about animals. She was nuts about animals, especially horses. I don't much like horses myself but there was plenty to talk about. They had chinchillas who bred like fruit flies and then they sold the babies. For a while they had a pair of homing pigeons but they didn't work out very well. They couldn't let them out because they'd have gone back home so Susan thought she'd have them breed and then their squabs would live here but they never did breed. And now I think of it, I can see why they didn't poor things, Susan had them in a little cage on the floor, should have been a loft. But she didn't know any better.

“The horses weren’t in bad shape even though the pasture was a marsh, pretty horses they were, too many, but they gave Susan a lot of pleasure to look at them. Bob and Susan enjoyed going to auctions and buying animals but then the question was what to do with them? I remember the German shepherds in kennels and of course the goats. There were three nice-looking doe goats, all pregnant. They got a buck but he wasn’t very healthy, he kept sneezing and then one morning he was dead, that was right before the does started kidding. I don’t know what they did wrong but those kids all died. Maybe it was that sick buck and they all had the disease but all the kids died and then that wasn’t enough, the does didn’t have any milk, it was the most dreadful mess I ever saw but I couldn’t see why it would happen. I’m only glad my goats didn’t catch it, whatever it was, even though I was over there trying to help her through the kidding some.

“Our human kids had gotten acquainted with Mort on the school bus. He seemed an ordinary freckle-faced kid and their age so they played with him. He was from Susan’s first marriage, Bob Rawley, and I remember from earlier hearing about the big scandal when she traded off Bob Rawley for Bob Billings and what a mean guy Bob Rawley was, but I didn’t get many details. That was in the time when we didn’t know anyone or talk to anyone much so by the time we knew them and Mort was playing with our kids, Bob and Susan had a couple more kids, all three of them well-behaved. Mort was a gentlemanly, well-mannered little cowboy and he and my second daughter hunted salamanders one time. I remember when he and Fred, that’s one of the Richardson kids, found a mine hole and they and our kids decided to explore it. We put a stop to that. Those mine holes are always falling in, usually right when somebody goes into them. Because of vibrations, being disturbed. They’re terribly dangerous. Though I could see the attraction and I read Tom Sawyer too but we wouldn’t let our kids go in there.

“So that was that family, they weren’t close, they were neighbors and there didn’t seem anything wrong with any of them, ordinary neighbors and they moved away. I heard about them now and again. Joyce at the store had a German shepherd puppy from them, said they kept moving around in the suburbs of Denver, poorer and poorer, split the sheets a few times and came back together, even sold all their horses and everything except the dogs. Pretty sad. Sometimes they’d come up and visit her folks up beyond Malta but we never saw them.

“It was in November it happened, there were two girls from Denver, about seventeen and twenty, spending a couple of weeks in a cabin up beyond Malta and they got shot and killed. Several cabins up in there. These two Denver girls, they’d been up in that cabin before with their parents and got to know the few people in that canyon. And the two of them were staying there over Thanksgiving and they were both murdered. You can imagine it was the talk of the neighborhood and everyone was utterly astonished when young Mort Rawley was picked up for it as the suspect and we all waited for the real killer to be found. But it never happened, Mort was all they picked up and this was his trial.

“Well, I got through the courtroom door all right, held my hands up while this cop went over me with a metal detector. There was some fuss over the tinfoil on a pack of gum in my shirt pocket and that awful lady felt my left breast — I felt like slugging her but there were those three armed men so I acted helpful.

“The place was packed. I finally saw room in the back and sat down by a pale young man who was reading *The Scientific American* and then a longhaired school bus driver sat down next to me. It’s a great old courtroom, oak everywhere, do-dads, chandeliers, and musty old law books on the walls. For the prospective jury, there were pews, beautiful old carved

pews but not nice to inhabit all day. It used to have spittoons all over, thirty of them, but they were gone. Nobody seems to know where they went. I imagine that one old mayor took them. He was that type. He had a barrel of silver dollars and a machine gun aimed down Main Street but they kept re-electing him, those Leadville people. Colorful, that's the way they like it.

"Bob and Susan were sitting two rows ahead of me and the people in front of me were chattering about lilacs and petunias but all in all, it was pretty quiet. I still thought I'd be out of there by noon.

"Then the lawyers filed in from the back room and there was Mort, pale and thin and scrubbed-looking and his hair was cut and plastered down. He smiled up at his lawyer and I recognized his smile, there's something tender and vulnerable about a smile. Then the old bailiff banged the gavel, Judge Wright came in, and the folderol began. I never saw anything for wasting time like that scene. When it looked like they were going to get off the ground, Judge Wright called a recess and we all went down the street for some coffee. I ended up in a little café talking with a skinny lady who said that when she was in line down the hall, some guy arrived at the door where the metal detector was and the cop passed it over his body and suddenly the thing went wild. Everybody jumped, especially the guy who was being thus explored and he said, "Oh, that must be my pliers," and quickly reached his hand under his jacket. By that time, there were six guns on him and a number of people hit the floor. "Keep your hands up!" one of the cops said and his voice was shaking and slowly he reached under the guy's jacket and sure enough, it was a pair of pliers.

"When I got back, people were lined up in the direction of the Jury Room, those were the people with excuses, and I thought that if anyone had an excuse I did, so I joined them. And eventually I got to be second in line and that feeling came

over me and I knew that what I was about to do, I might as well not bother. It's kind of like stage fright or a burst of shyness but I've noticed over the years that it's a sure thing. I almost left the line but I thought I'd be irritated if I did and I had to try. So I went on in. There was the judge and the court stenographer and the lawyers and Mort. Mort was busily scribbling on a spiral notebook. The Judge told me to sit down, for which I was grateful. I told them I knew Mort, that we were neighbors, that Mort played with my children and that he seemed a harmless kid. Then Mort glanced up at me and gave me a curt nod. I nodded back with a smile. But when the lawyers asked me if I thought I could be objective, I said I thought I could. I had prided myself on my objectivity. So Judge Wright didn't excuse me and I wasn't at all surprised because I'd had that feeling when I was second in line.

"I had lunch with a couple of ladies and we talked about how to get out of it. They told me that Mr. Williams, who'd been a few people ahead of me in line, had gone in there and Mort had beamed at him, all pleased, 'Hi, Mr. Williams!' and the Judge had said, 'Excused!' They must've told him to shut up after that or he figured it out himself not to speak to people he knew because I felt he was a wee bit surly with me.

"I got back early from lunch and sat down in the hall for a while and in came Susan and her mother and sat across the wastebasket from me. I didn't know what to do so I sat there and pretty soon Susan said, 'How's your family, Jane?'

"Well you know, it was like I was sitting in her kitchen, something about the voice. I recognize voices over everything. Somebody I haven't talked to for twenty years calls up on the phone and all they have to say is 'Hello,' and it all comes back, like Proust and his little cookie. So a rush of feeling came over me but all I said was, 'They're all fine, Susan.' I couldn't say, 'How's yours?' That'd be vicious. So I said, 'How're you holding up?'

“‘I’m holding up,’ she said.

“‘Looks like it’ll be a long haul,’ I said, and I almost cried, I got a feeling how she was and what it was like for her and I almost cried.

“‘Were you excused from the jury?’ she asked.

“‘No,’ I said, and I leaned forward to tell her all about it. ‘I told them we were neighbors and how the kids played together but they didn’t excuse me.’ I didn’t use Mort’s name.

“‘Well,’ she said, ‘I shouldn’t be talking to you then,’ and she turned away from me and not another word. Then Bob Billings came in, her present husband, and Bob Cornish who was her dad, and I didn’t know how to stay there without talking so I said hello to all of them, and I left, it was real thick.

“The afternoon was a dead bore. I read my book, which was about real diamond smuggling and it was boring and I talked with the guys sitting around me but I didn’t learn much and then we were all told to come back the next afternoon.

“I got home and Jimmy Holliday was there, he and my husband were sitting in the sun drinking and I joined them. I don’t usually drink much but I tossed it down. Jimmy told of the time he was called in for jury duty and then he was brought up to be questioned.

“‘What is your occupation?’

“‘I’m a poet.’

“‘Whom do you work for?’

“‘I’m self-employed.’

“Well, who do you make your poems for?”

“For the world.’

“Excused!’

“The next day I was reading another book, A. E. Coppard. We waited while the rest of the second day’s excuses were finished up, then the lawyers and Mort came in and the bailiff stood us up and Judge Wright came in and they said they were going to start now, there were about eighty of us left. Someone stuck her hand in a box and pulled out a name. It was mine. I was not pleased. I got up and sat in the Jury Box. Of course, I sat in the wrong chair and they spent a lot of the Court’s time getting me into the chair they wanted me in, and they took A. E. Coppard away from me and Judge Wright quipped something embarrassing about how he didn’t allow no dirty books in the Jury Box but I didn’t say anything, I smiled, because he was the Judge.

“Next morning, nine a.m., I was back in the box. Up until then I thought maybe I’d like to do it, take a paid vacation in glorious Leadville, hoping to get the motel with the swimming pool, get in on all the real evidence of the case, find out in my own mind if that little freckle-faced kid did murder.

“I was watching his face that day, all day long. I’d been watching him before too but now I got a real good head-on view. He’d grown, of course, since I knew him, and actually I couldn’t see a freckle on him. He looked young and soft — he was only fifteen. And he was scared. There was something about his jaw I didn’t like. He had an undershot jaw. I didn’t remember him having that before. But then I saw Susan’s jaw stuck out some too, maybe he’d inherited it from her. I saw he was trying not to fidget. So was I.

“The lawyers did a lot of talking at us and asking questions. Then one of them got up and said we should understand

that they didn't have to prove motive and went on for a while about motive and I looked hard at Mort and that was the only time he seemed to be expressing a feeling with his face, his eyes were jumping around all over the ceiling and he was blushing deep red and I thought, 'my God, he's thinking about the motive!' It was like a fist in my gut. One minute I was thinking how it was pretty exotic being there in the Jury Box and the next minute I saw Mort remembering. Remembering is really a specific act. There's nothing quite like it. He was remembering and he was very excited about what he remembered. He blushed darkly and he rolled his head back and his eyes skittered around. I believe I was the only one who saw it. Everyone was looking at the lawyer, everyone but Mort and me. As far as I was concerned, that was it. There was no doubt in my mind but that he had murdered those girls. Then I glanced over at Susan and she was looking at Mort like she had been looking at him all those days, she was looking at him hungrily and I knew how she must be suffering, watching her boy, yearning for him across the railing, every cell in her body wanting him to be all right again. Then I wanted to get out, I wanted to get out of there, I didn't want to hurt Susan, it was important and it was horrible.

"Then I knew what I should have said to the Judge, I should have said I was sympathetic about Susan. But it was too late now. And I realized too what we were there to do. We were there to lock him up if he had done what I saw that he had done. Judge him and lock him up for years and years.

"Next recess, the jury that was in the Box was sent to the Jury Room and we talked and a lady said, 'Have you noticed that Mort has never once looked at his mother?' I went and opened the window and crawled out and stood on the fire escape and tried to collect myself.

"I needed to be soothed. During lunch hour, I went to the drug store and had a hot fudge sundae, tried to call home, no answer, tried to call a friend, she was out, ended up on the

porch of the courthouse talking with a little man about all the animals that come to our feeders. That made me feel a lot better, talking about animals.

“In the afternoon recess, another lady talked about the time she’d been on a jury for a murder trial three years before, some man beat up his girlfriend and killed her. The lady said they gave him two years for manslaughter because he was high on dope and he’s out now. That put another light on this one, I mean I sure pity any girl that man picks up now. And I was raising three teen-age daughters at the time. My emotional state was a mess.

“It was about time to go home again when they got through all the accepted excuses and came to the next part, where the lawyers got rid of jurors without stating any excuse. The lawyer for the prosecution got up and said he’d like to get rid of me. I leaped joyously out of my chair while the Judge was saying it was all right. Then I told myself to behave and I walked decently out, didn’t whoop and holler and dance around or even do a subtle Charlie Chaplin kick as I was going through the door, I simply went out and I was glad, I was glad, I was glad.

“The trial went for a couple weeks, kept on the front page the whole time, rumors flying all over the country, people from both coasts even asking about it. It was fun to brag about Mort being our near neighbor, seemed like a nice boy, played with our kids, everybody we told about it popping their eyes out very satisfyingly. There was evidently no discussion of motive in the whole trial. Now, I’m accustomed to detective fiction where the motive is always clear, at least at the end. I guess I should have sat in on the whole thing.

“The gossip was really wild. Some people said Susan did it, that she’d been a dope addict for years and went crazy when she found out that Bob had been ‘fooling around’ with the two girls. Some said it was Susan’s two brothers, the ones who’d called the sheriff on Mort in the first place. It was said

that when the sheriff came to get Mort, Susan had said, 'Don't say anything,' and he hadn't, he was a quiet type anyway. Then a rapist jail-mate of Mort's came forward and told of a conversation he'd had with Mort, 'Why didn't you rape them girls when you had 'em there?' Teasing and razzing him, intimating he wasn't half a man and Mort had said, 'There wasn't time,' but they didn't let the jury in on that one, only the newspapers. There was a lot of talk about a possible partner in crime and several people were mentioned as possibilities. I was rather partial to that one myself. The evidence was what they call circumstantial, the truck for instance. Mort, who was visiting his grandparents, the Cornishes, with his family for the Thanksgiving weekend, was out with his uncle's truck at the time of the murder, a bloody footprint at the girls' cabin matching Mort's boot, stuff like that. It was said that Bob and Susan had a friendly, helpful neighborly relationship with the girls. The two sets of parents of the two girls were out for blood and during the trial, there were three guns confiscated at the door by the metal detector. But then, people around here do tend to carry guns. What I can't figure out is why the furniture was taken out of the girls' cabin and strewn around the yard. And what bothers me is, I never spotted Mort as a bad'un when he was little. Some time in that period, I looked 'Mort' up in the dictionary. It means 'death.'

"It was Mr. Danbury who sold the murder weapon to Bob Billings and Bob gave it to Mort for his birthday or Christmas or something, just a long-barreled .38, I think it was, but then Mr. Danbury felt like he was at fault somehow. The girls were evidently shot in their beds, one getting a bullet in the head close up and the other getting several all over. She'd put her arm up like a shield but she'd died anyway, then the bodies were dumped in the creek there, the heftier girl sank under the ice but the lighter girl floated on down so she was spotted the next day. It took two weeks to find the body of the bigger girl because the creek froze up just then.

"After a couple of weeks of evidence such as it was and

a few hours of deliberation, the jury found Mort guilty of second degree murder, which didn't make sense because it was certainly a premeditated thing, but gossip had it that they did that so that he'd be under the care of the Juvenile people. The jury then swore a pact among themselves not to talk about the case any more. It was a couple of months we waited to hear how many years he'd get.

"I heard it on the radio when the news came and I was talking to a neighbor on the phone an hour or so later, she was going on and on about how some people had moved in with her and she was going to California. It was a long time before I could get a word in, finally I did, 'Did you hear?' I said, 'Mort got twenty years.' It's not very often I'm first in with the news and it was very satisfying. 'That'll make him thirty-five when he gets out.'

"'He'll get off in eight for good behavior,' she said.

"'I expect he will,' I said. 'He was always a well-behaved boy.'

"There was a conversation I had two or three years later with a real estate guy who was mixed up in local politics, building permits or something. Anyway, he said that Mort had been sent for good behavior to one of these work facilities where the prisoners promise on their honor to stay and work. And as soon as he could, he ran off and went to a farmhouse close by and beat up the lady there until she was very nearly dead.

"Well, that made it clear anyway, so I don't suppose he'll get that kind of trust again. Until he gets out.

"But what will he be like when he gets out?"



BUT A CHILD NEEDS HER

Dear Sissy,

“Well, Hon, our poor Sarah Anne is dead and her troubles are over. The burying’s Sunday. But don’t try to come. You know I knew it was coming and I was prepared for it. I don’t need you here, I really don’t. And I know your Henry needs you there and the business and all. I’ve got the two children here to hold and sweet-talk. Poor little motherless things. But I’ll be a mother to them. You know I’ve always taken care of them as if they was my own.

“I just feel the spirit of Sarah Anne welling up in my soul and I want to talk about her, about her life and about how it was at the last. Remember what a skinny little thing she was when she was in pigtails? Except for her stomach sticking out. Remember how she used to hang onto my leg if I was standing, hide under my chair if I was sitting down? And when I’d walk around, she’d hang onto my skirt with one hand just like she was a fringe or something, her whole other hand in her mouth, all four fingers! And when she was a tiny tyke crawling about on the floor, remember how when she’d cry, all I had to do was stand over her, a foot on either side, with my housecoat on that

went to the floor, and she'd quiet down in two seconds. Remember?

"Oh, Sissy, she was the most satisfying little child any mother'd want, especially with no man about. I tell you, Hon, as I've told you before, if it's a choice between having a man or a child, I'd take the child any day. A man wants a woman but a child needs her.

"And Sarah Anne never did grow up, did she.

"I know you always felt it was my fault she didn't and I should have kicked her out of the house when she got big. But, Hon, how could I have, the way she never got over that miscarriage when she was twelve?

"Sissy, you just gotta put up with me here because I just gotta spill it all out. Sarah Anne is laying dead in the funeral home right now; her belly so swelled up she could be having triplets. And you know as well as I do, it all came from that time when she was twelve.

"And she never told who it was did it to her.

"And she cried for weeks after the miscarriage.

"And then she was drinking everything in sight, remember? Vanilla and rubbing alcohol if there wasn't some booze in the cupboard. Remember, Sissy?

"And you wanted me to make her stand on her own two feet and live in the world! After a thing like that!

"No, I remember saying to you at that time I'd do everything I could to keep her from the world! I wasn't gonna let her

go out into that! I was gonna protect her from life on earth as long as she lived if I had to live to a hundred.

“You scolded me no end about how I always had booze in the house after that. And it was true, I did, and I did it for Sarah Anne! For a little twelve-year-old girl! And you knew it. And you tried to make me stop buying it for her. But, Hon, you know it was the only pleasure in her life!

“And I was her only security. I kept her under my skirts her whole life long and I don’t mind saying so.

“Then when she was sixteen and she’d become such a drunkard by that time, I just didn’t bother sending her to school anymore. It was those other kids teasing her. ‘Wino! Wino!’ they called her. And the teachers writing notes home about how Sarah Anne was always acting ‘strange’ and had a funny ‘smell’ about her, talking about ‘help’ and ‘services.’ No, they weren’t taking my Sarah Anne away from me and they weren’t taking any pleasure away from her! I could take her out of school and I did. I never had sent her to school much anyhow. She never took a fancy to it.

“She tried getting jobs, you know she did. She tried any number of times. But her health was so bad.

“Lot of times she’d go to work the first day drunk and come home to me in an hour. And I’d always be glad to see her! And maybe she’d be crying about it and I’d sit with her on that little love seat in the corner of the parlor and she always liked me to wrap that old shawl around her, even over her face, and she’d put all four fingers in her mouth, just like when she was a baby!

“Then she’d stop crying and I’d bustle around and bring us some drinks and her face’d light up! How could I stop bring-

ing her drinks when her face'd light up like that? It was the only time! She loved to be waited on. You know that.

“She never was any good at working around the house either, poor thing, never was good at anything. Now and again she'd try and do something, clean a cupboard or fix supper, but all she'd end up doing was breaking dishes and spilling stuff all over the stove! I had to laugh! I'd tell her, ‘Now, you just sit down over here and keep me company while I clean it up,’ and I'd hand her a drink to keep her quiet.

“I know you always said I should teach her how to work but she was so bad at it! And I always like things to be done well. I never could abide things done in a sloppy way. When it comes to housekeeping, Hon, you know well, when you're talking to me, you're talking to an expert! And then to see Sarah Anne waving a dustrag about in my things, well, it was more than I could bear! Then you remember that poor little twit of a Georgie that started coming around and she wanted to go out with him and I never could say ‘No’ to anything she wanted, ever, I just never could say ‘No’ to her at all. ‘You be back home here by one,’ was all I'd say. And she would be back by one. But by one, they'd have done all there was to do!

“I never complained. I love little Suzie as if she were my own child. And later on, what was that other fella's name, I can't remember, when Harvey was born, I was as pleased as I could be. Such all-around wonderful children they are and a solace and happiness to their loving granny.

“I know you've scolded me about taking over the work of raising them but it's not been like that at all, really. She'd be home with them all day while I was at work and if they'd run to me with their troubles instead of her, that wasn't my fault!

“The strangest thing happened at the end. You know how much Sarah Anne liked to salt her food. Remember how we'd

see her pick up the saltshaker and it seemed like that was the only exercise she'd put her heart into. Remember? 'Shake that thing!' we'd shout in chorus and we'd laugh at her and she'd smile and shake and shake.

"Then you remember how just before Christmas she stopped drinking. How we'd try and tempt her with eggnog and hot buttered rum but she wouldn't drink it, just sat there glum and getting fatter and fatter on practically nothing at all! Well, you know, after Harvey was born and she had to have her gall bladder removed, that'd be five years ago now, how the doctors said she should stop drinking, said she had cirrhosis of the liver. A thirty-year-old woman! I always told you she wasn't strong. I always told you and you never believed me. Well, you'll believe me now because now she's dead.

"Oh, dear, Sissy, my heart just breaks and breaks. But I will go on.

"What I was trying to say is they told her to stop drinking then and when she stopped, at first I thought, well, that's great, you know, even though I missed her having a drink with me now and then across the day. But it seemed like from Christmas on, she just went downhill.

"Till the time I wrote you about three weeks ago when her face was gray and she was so bloated and miserable and she couldn't think to finish a sentence and I took her in to that pinch-faced doctor with the crooked teeth and the nice receptionist.

"But it turned out the reason Sarah Anne couldn't drink was she had ulcers on top of everything else and they hurt when she drank. And the reason she was so big was fluid, she was full of fluid. And they had to give her transfusions and a lot of tests and she stayed in that hospital several days and all the time she was there she was saying, 'I wanna go home,' and

calling 'Mamma.' And so they let her come home, and that's when they told me she was at death's door and there was nowhere else to go and there was nothing ahead for my Sarah Anne but pain and misery and death. And they gave us pills for the ulcers and pills for the fluid and they said a nurse would come every day. And they told me if I gave her fluids and salt, she'd die.

"We sat together on the loveseat in the corner of the parlor. I wrapped my shawl over her and I saw her hand go up to her mouth and she put all four fingers into her mouth and we sat together a long time and I hummed the old lullaby to her, the one she loved the most all her life. And we sat that way a long time, a long time. And then I heard her saying something over and over and finally I raised her up and asked her what she was saying. And her face was awful and sick and miserable and I hated to see her in so much pain and she said, 'I just wanna die, Mamma.' She said it over and over, and she was looking at me pleading for me to give her what she wanted as I always had.

"And so we went into the kitchen together and she sat and watched me as I fixed a mess of eggs and bacon and a big pitcher of Tang. And I sat across the table from her as she took that saltshaker and shook it and shook it over her eggs and bacon. 'Shake that thing! Shake that thing!' she said and she smiled, that little smile of hers and she ate the eggs and the bacon and some toast and she drank that whole pitcher of Tang except the little glass I poured for myself and couldn't drink. Then she took her pills and I put her to bed.

"The nurse was disturbed when she came in the evening and talked about fluids and salt and Sarah Anne moaned and cried and called for me, 'Mamma!' like a little child and I'd hold her hand. 'Mamma, I'm thirsty,' and I'd bring her another pitcher of Tang.

“On the third evening the nurse said Sarah Anne had to go back to the hospital; there seemed no way she could persuade me to not bring Sarah Anne what she wanted. And she called the ambulance and Sarah Anne was carried out bulging like a mountain on a stretcher.

“Next morning early I went there and I said to that receptionist, ‘Don’t stretch out the dying,’ I said, ‘There’s nothing left but torture, you know, and I see no use in it.’ Then I went to Sarah Anne’s bedside and I gave her the shawl and I sang the lullaby but when she asked for water, I couldn’t give it to her because the nurse was watching and the doctors wanted to do more tests so I just had to go away.

“I didn’t sleep for three nights thinking of her suffering there. I’d spend as much time as I could at her bedside, humming and holding her hand, but she got to where she didn’t know me from a nurse. She even stopped calling ‘Mamma’ and just moaned, and then in the middle of last night they called me and she had died.

“Well, there’s nothing more to say Hon, just that I have Suzie and Harvey and they have me, and I’ll take care of these sweet children as long as they need me, even if I have to live to a hundred.

Your loving sister,

Eunice



BIOGRAPHY OF A SPY

Walter Reinbacher was a very bright boy in Kansas in a big family of not terribly bright kids, the children of a Lutheran minister. His father died when he was little and his mother was the pillar of the Lutheran community of Winfield, Kansas. She ran a boarding house. She always won the Christmas decorations contest with her huge papier-mâché statues of the nativity and the three kings and the shepherds and whatever else entered her head. It went all over the yard and into the house to the tree and every year it was different from every other year. She started working on it as soon as she took down the previous year's decorations, and so she was always saving wrapping paper and glittery things. She saved string too and it was a family joke always to give her string and she'd take it and untangle it deftly and roll it onto a ball. She was a tiny woman and sang "Shall We Gather at the River" in a small but sweet voice somewhat out of tune but with a passion in it and a sparkle in her eyes that made up for everything.

Walter was an incurable tease. When he was just a little boy, he found a dead rat the cat had left. This was not long after his father had died. He picked it up by the tail and he and his little brother Franz chased their older sister Ella around with it till she squealed, then threw it at her. It had rather more

effect than he had intended because Ella screamed and screamed until the doctor came and gave her a shot. But it didn't stop his teasing.

Little Walter liked especially to tease his mother because it was from her that he got his brains. She enjoyed most of all to dominate and control everything but Walter always skipped out of her clutches laughing so she loved him inordinately.

Somehow she scraped together enough money to send him to college and he studied anthropology because he wanted adventure and to find treasures in exotic places. Naturally, he did very well, and when he got out of college he was off to Egypt and Arabia digging up treasures. Walter always got what he wanted by being brilliant and by sparkling his eyes.

Now and then, he'd come home to visit bearing thrilling exotic gifts for everyone. One year he came back and in the hotel in Chicago he realized he didn't have a gift for his little three-year-old nephew, Hans. Little Hans seemed to be a bright boy too though he was fat and stumpy and sickly and much too solemn for Walter's taste. He was the adopted son of Walter's flippy sister Ella. He solemnly mimicked his elders, sang remarkably, and could already read. So Walter went out and bought a little bottle of glue and some walnuts and a nutcracker and he sat in his hotel room cracking the walnuts open until he finally got one that was perfect, put in a dollar and glued it nicely together again. That was in the Thirties when a dollar was a lot of money even for a grownup and for a three-year-old kid it would be a huge treasure.

When Walter got home, he passed out all the gifts and watched little Hans' eyes go from excitement to dismay to despair before he pulled the walnut out of his pocket and gave it to him. There was a moment of tense embarrassment then but Walter's mother handed Hans a nutcracker and made him crack it open and Walter watched Hans' eyes light up again.

Little Hans had a postcard collection and Walter with all his travels was a major contributor to it. Hans collected them from all the family and so when Walter was in Paris on the way to the dig at the ancient city of Persepolis he bought a postcard of a naked lady and sent it to his mother. "Having a good trip. Wish you were here. Love, Walter." And laughed all the way to Persepolis. That postcard became the most prized possession of little Hans.

Walter loved women. He was crazy about them. He liked them fluffy and giggly and expensive. He liked to set aside his intellect and revel in them. He handled them with the sparkle in his eye, the grace of his manner, his money, and his intense virility. He enjoyed dancing and he enjoyed bearing gifts. He liked it when they teased him because his ears stuck out and because of his funny name. He liked to manipulate them and be manipulated by them in every way possible. When he found a good one, he became obsessed for a while, put out a lot of money on her for the joy of seeing her smile and was with her intensely and often. But when they started to whine, he'd get rid of them and escape from his escape back into the complexities of the Middle East. At last, in his thirties, he married one of them, not because Helen was much different from the rest but because it was time to marry and she seemed tractable.

Walter had a terrific knack for understanding the old scripts and in 1942 when the U.S. had just joined the Second World War, he got into the Signal Intelligence and transferred this knack to cracking the enemy's codes. In 1947, the CIA recognized in him not only a decoder but also an expert on understanding the Middle East. This was a great break for him because his mind was hungry for more complexity always and the CIA promised to be as complex as the Middle East. It was a delight to match the two together. He had a great deal of ability in handling people too. The CIA had him as a top advisor on the Middle East. He gave up anthropology and settled

down with Helen near Washington and became a spy.

Walter always wanted intellectual stimulation and he always wanted to be in control. He wanted to have people around that he could count on. He wanted to be The Man and very often he was. It was he who took the bits of information and understood what they meant, he who could articulate them for the White House, the Military, and rearrange them for the Press. Often he went to the Middle East and talked there with the people in control to spot jewels of information about them that he couldn't expect to get from his affiliates. He became highly respected behind the scenes. Everyone called him "Wally."

He had a son now growing up, another very bright lad. Helen had named him Robert and for Robert, Walter became more careful, more respectable, started investing money in real estate and making his relationship with Helen more solid. Robert grew up and went to college, studying to be a doctor.

In 1970, at the age of sixty-three, Walter retired with high honors from the CIA and went to teach at the War College. Robert was in pre-med. school and was now into taking drugs. Walter raged at him to stop, pleaded with him, all but disowned him. Robert dropped out of school, went to England, and got very involved there in a hospice watching people die, giving them drugs to make them happy, taking drugs himself. Robert also began learning how to play the East Indian stringed instrument, the sitar, its long gourd stem across his chest reaching as high as his bobbing head as he sat strumming it with long sensitive fingers cross-legged on the floor.

One night Walter woke up and his bed was full of blood, his pajamas drenched in it. He thought he was dying. He was retired from the CIA, his son was a waster, his wife old, he had done nothing of interest for years and now he was bleeding to death. As it turned out, it was easily taken care of but from that night Walter's life changed.

Walter bought himself some new clothes, night club clothes, even several pair of silk underpants with pornographic pictures on them. He left Helen. He still knew how to pick up women, glorious sensual young women. He still had his charm, his sparkling eyes, his virility. He was bald now and his ears stuck out all the more. He went out, got women and spent money on them. He also began helping the National Narcotics Intelligence to find the sources of drugs in the Middle East.

In England, Robert discovered the novels of his cousin Hans and wrote to him about the hospice, the wonders to be found in drugs and his dream to make a film on someone dying on an acid trip. But Hans wrote back that the world needed good doctors a lot more than fake artists or creepy drug ads and after a time of consideration, Robert gave up the hospice and most of the drugs and went back to pre-med. school.

Walter was relieved to have Robert back as a respectable pre-med. student. He introduced Robert to his favorite girlfriend, Hannah Schmidt from East Germany. Robert was horrified. The girl was his age, more than forty years younger than Walter was. She was his age and sexy in a new fur coat, purring at his father in a thick German accent.

In 1978, Edwin Wilson, a higher official of the CIA than Walter and a great hulking man, approached Walter with a very secret plan involving sending atomic and political secrets to Libya. It was this project and its results that brought Walter to his eventual death.

Walter joined Wilson and began editing a highly classified news-sheet for the secretary of defense and a few other high-echelon U.S. political people. Then he would rewrite it and send it to Libya. "Once you get into the CIA," he had said at his mother's funeral, "you can never get out."

He was living with Hannah mainly and visiting with Helen fairly often. He was very hard to find and seemed to be avoiding people in some fear. He traveled to Libya several times, sometimes under an assumed name.

For some months during Robert's internship, he found himself bringing people back to life after they were pronounced dead. The brain always interested him very much and he toyed with the idea of becoming a brain surgeon. After he became a full-fledged doctor, however, he felt more strongly about the joys of country living. He got married. He and his wife settled down to a general practice in upstate California and had a child, a little boy. They became good friends with Walter and Hannah.

In 1982, Edwin Wilson was arrested as a traitor. Early in '83, he was convicted of trying to hire an assassin to kill his prosecutors in the Justice Department. Members of his group started dying, one in a boating accident where the boat exploded, one was said to have frozen to death outside his home in Virginia. In April, Walter was brought forward as a traitor and double agent for Wilson and for some weeks he was very much in the news. Robert offered to go to Virginia to be with him, to give support to Helen and Hannah, to help in any way he could. But Walter said he must not come, that he, Walter, was being framed and that Robert might get swept up and in serious trouble if he came to town. Robert felt that Walter was a dinosaur unable to cope with modern times, but he obeyed and stayed away.

Walter was now 75 years old. He wrote a letter to his lawyers: "I do not have the capacity to tackle a trial which will malign me," it said, "I am not guilty of the allegations which I believe are being prepared. You have my honest statements. Our justice system may be slightly flawed in the heavy use of self-serving testimony of admitted criminals."

He didn't send the letter yet. He arranged his affairs, went through his papers, telephoned friends. He wrote more letters. He tried to think of everything. He bought a Mother's

Day card and ordered a single lily to be sent to Robert's wife. He bought a 12-gauge shotgun and hid it in a storage room in the basement of Hannah's apartment building. He had long talks with Hannah, called Robert and talked a lot with him too. On Thursday, he was indicted. Thursday evening he slipped past dozens of reporters in the lobby of Helen's apartment house and had a quiet dinner with her, charming her, soothing her, telling her to be brave. Twice that night, he called Robert.

Friday morning was to be his arraignment, at nine o'clock. He dressed in his best diplomatic suit with the vest and the matching hat and at 8 a.m., he left Hannah's apartment.

He did not, however, go to his arraignment. He went instead to the storage room in the basement where he had hidden his shotgun and for six hours he paced and sat, dreamed, remembered, justified, and variously thought about his life.

By eleven, the FBI was out in force hunting him. A warrant was issued for his arrest.

Hannah said that she heard the shot as she was approaching the storage shed. He had placed a chair against a wall and was sitting in it. He must have seen her coming, she said, there was a vent to the hall, or perhaps he heard her footsteps. Quickly, he placed the muzzle of the shotgun into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Hannah said later that she had kissed his dead face, had said aloud, "It's all right," then went upstairs to her apartment and called Robert. She was wearing a black dress and some smudges of Walter's brain were on it. She was still wearing it six hours later when Robert arrived and Walter's body was still in the chair, his face blissful and relaxed, haloed by the brain splattered on the wall.

Robert left Hannah's apartment building and went to see Walter's lawyers next. There were masses of police, FBI and news people all around. He wanted to say to the press that his father was innocent, that it was a frame, but the lawyers told him he must say nothing to the press at all. They said if he wanted to visit his mother, he'd better go as an elevator repairman and they gave him the outfit, the one-piece suit with the repair service device on it, the cap, the tool chest. "Now," they said, "you can visit her. But speak to no one."

Robert went then to his mother's apartment house and there were Time and Newsweek, TV cameras and mike booms, crowds of news people. He got through them without being recognized and went up to Helen's apartment. Helen answered the door. On a little table by the door was a pile of pistols. FBI men were all over the apartment, methodically opening drawers, moving furniture aside, rolling back rugs. They had come, she said, to look for anything Walter might have left that would be evidence about his connection with Libya. She said there was no such thing in her apartment, that they were welcome to look, but she couldn't bear to have them wandering around armed and had made them all put their guns by the door. Robert and Helen wept together and talked awhile, the FBI men wandering about them, but then Robert went again across town to Hannah's building.

His father's body had now been removed to the morgue. The police and the FBI had finished their work in the storage room. Robert obtained permission to go in there with his sitar and be alone where his father had died.

The chair was still against the wall. Above it, the wall itself was scarred and although an attempt had been made to clean up the blood and the brain matter, some of it was still there. Robert sat cross-legged on the floor before this remnant of his father's death, tuning the delicate instrument that had been his solace since his time in England some years ago.

Patiently and carefully, he tuned it. And then he played, holding the stem across his chest, bobbing his head, often with his eyes closed, his long fingers sliding along the strings, making quavers and subtleties in the music. Until at last he felt as though his father's spirit came to him there and Robert felt in himself the bliss that he had seen on his father's dead face.



PHONE CALL: THE SIXTIES

P - "Howdy, Goldie, how're things?"

G - "Oh, purty fine I guess except I'm in the dumps today."

P - "Yeah?"

G - "Is what happened is, you remember Lenny?"

P - "The old one or the new one?"

G - "The new one. The old one got married six months ago
an' moved to California."

P - "Really married, huh? With papers?"

G - "Yep."

P - "He'll be back."

G - "S'pose he will. No skin off my nose."

P - "Bull."

G - "Well, anyway."

P - "Yeah, right, about the new one."

G - "Yeah, well, he went back to Omaha, had to go, you know, and Martha went after him."

P - "You mean Martha of Martha and Jim?"

G - "Right."

P - "But I just saw Jim at the gas station, looked just fine."

G - "Well, actually, he is just fine, 'cause he's been hanging around quite a bit with Ronda these days an' he's been pretty happy."

P - "What does Ron think of that?"

G - "He's okay. And Martha and Ronda are still best friends. He's moving down to Taos with him'n Martha's kids."

P - "You mean him'n Ronda's kids."

G - "No, Ronda'n Jim are taking Ron'n Ronda's kid an' Ron's taking Ron'n Martha's two kids."

P - "Wait a minute, wait a minute!"

G - "Sure, didn't you know about that? Ron'n Martha used to be married an' had a couple kids, see, an' they lived down the road from Ronda'n Jim and their two kids. Okay?"

P - "You mean they switched?"

G - "No, this was another Jim."

P - "Oh."

G - "So Jim, that's the first Jim, he went away temporarily for some reason and Martha and Ronda became real close an' Ronda's brother, Butch, came by an' Martha'n him took it up some so that Ron'n Ronda naturally fell in together an' it all worked out, more or less. At the end of it, Jim, that's the first Jim, took his'n Ronda's kids an' went to Florida. Ron'n Ronda had a baby of their own, an' everything went along real happy for a couple of years or so till they got a divorce back a year ago last Christmas, Ron'n Ronda did. But that only lasted less'n a year an' they got married back again but I guess that didn't work out like or they wouldn't be doin' what's goin' on."

P - "What I can't figure out is, is it Ronda that's such hot stuff taking away all Martha's husbands and then continuing to keep Martha's friendship, which must be no mean trick — I can't imagine how she does it — or is it Martha giving Ronda the wink to ease the pain for the guys while she goes in search of the greener grass?"

G - "Well, is what struck me is how Martha keeps coming to me to apologize for taking away Lenny. I mean she came an' apologized before she went after him an' I keep telling her it's okay, I ain't mad at all an' I hope they enjoy themselves or whatever but it's like there ain't no way to make her believe me."

P - "Jesus."

G - "Well, anyway."

P - "Yeah, so what else is new?"



BURYING BADGER

At the age of eighteen, Esta had acquired a puppy quite casually, about the time that she had started painting, and when I first met them, Badger was a high-strung but well-behaved and well-cared-for little shepherd-terrier.

But the years tell on us all. Badger lost her hearing at the age of eleven and developed a kidney malfunction so that not only did she quit behaving well because she couldn't hear but she also developed a bad smell and had to be fed only a certain very expensive dog food gentle to the kidneys. It was at this time that Esta began thinking about having Badger quietly "put away."

That was about the time when Esta's mother went to her deathbed. Esta sat at the bedside and watched her mother die by inches. Perhaps it was that that made her delay in putting the dog to sleep. After her mother died, Esta got a job taking care of old people. Eventually this ended but there still was the old dog who now developed heart trouble. Esta, trying to do what was right, began tucking digitalis pills in the dog's food.

Esta is small and tough, an excellent horsewoman and an acute observer. She has a contagious and ready laugh, which often points up the humor in things not usually laughed at.

We began going riding sometimes on her horses when we had time. She's great with horses and I'm pretty clumsy on a horse. But riding with her, I could ask and she could answer in such clarity that I was feeling after twenty years of knowing I couldn't ride that maybe in a few weeks with her, I could be okay at it.

I arrived on Wednesday with my cowboy boots in the car and a horsy glint in my eye. She was in the back yard sunning herself.

"How would you like to go with me to put Badger away?" she asked without preamble.

"Sure," I said, and the horses fell out of my head.

Badger was standing in the house, looking, as was her wont those days, as though she were in a mental fog, staggering some. I tried to say things to Esta to encourage her. And Badger did seem worse than usual.

"She won't eat her kidney diet. I've had to give her hamburger now for a couple of weeks," Esta explained.

"You wouldn't want her to die of kidney failure. That's a terrible death," I said.

"Let's take her on a walk first," Esta decided. I gave her all the decisions. I didn't want the weight of them on myself. Anyway, if Esta made them, they'd be right for her and I was there to give her courage.

We went on the walk. I suppose Esta had taken that old dog on that walk twice a day since she got that house. Out the

back gate and down the alley very slowly indeed. We stopped at the street and talked with exhaustive repetitions to a neighbor lady about the fact that someone seemed to be poisoning the animals in the neighborhood. They discussed who it might be. I watched a squirrel come up to the lady's little boy begging for nuts. Badger stood in her fog not noticing anything as far as I could perceive.

Finally we crossed the street, down a long block and a half, up another alley past blossoming trees. I sniffed the trees while Badger sniffed the ground. She did seem to still sniff, although I didn't notice her following any trails. She simply stood with her nose close to the ground till our patience was exhausted.

"Hi Esta, hello Badger!" everyone said, but no one came up to Badger to give her a pat. Badger didn't seem to like being patted by anyone except Esta. Of course, she didn't hear any of the greetings either. Strange, after six years of the dog being deaf, Esta continued to talk to her. "Over here, Badger," "Come on, now." What was it? A past, I guess. Seventeen years together. Esta had always talked to her and so continued to do so.

Eventually we inched our way through several alleys and down some quiet streets back to the backyard gate. The decision to put Badger away was still strong in Esta. After some effort laced with hysteria, she finally persuaded Badger to get into her car. The old dog stood on the back seat and when the car took off, she rather fell to a lying down position.

Soon, we arrived at the veterinary hospital. Esta went to the desk and, her face red and tears running down her cheeks, she asked if the doctor were available to put away her dog.

"What happened?" asked the nurse with a show of concern.

“Just old,” Esta said.

The vet came out looking properly serious. Esta said she wanted to be present at the death. This took the vet aback considerably but he accepted it. We went to the car and brought the old dog in. She didn’t seem afraid. Maybe a bit more tense than usual, though it was hard to tell. The vet led us into a back room, shut the door, and the four of us were alone.

With tears streaming down her face, Esta thoughtfully discussed the manner of her dog’s death. I could see the vet hoping fervently that it would go smoothly. He was frightened of her tears. When I thought of the decision taking six years, I felt they were quite reasonable. Esta put Badger on the table and the vet shaved a spot on her leg then plunged the needle into her vein. Badger started to struggle. This put Esta in the position of having to hold her down as her last act to her life-long friend. Badger never liked having her legs touched. I put one hand on the dog’s rear and one on Esta’s shoulder. In about two seconds, Badger fell to her side.

“Oh, no! She’s dead!” Esta shouted. I felt so darn bad by this time that I found tears in my eyes too. Tears for Esta’s complicated anguish.

“I want you to be sure she’s dead before you toss her in the bin,” Esta instructed the vet. He assured her he would check the heart in a couple of minutes as Esta and I fled out of that place, into her car, and out on the road to the farm to feed the horses.

What can a friend think of to say? I had been saying, “It’s okay,” over and over. It couldn’t bear another go.

I didn’t want to chatter, though I remember saying that it was raining across the way. “I don’t have to talk,” I said to myself. A long moment of silent solemnity passed. Finally I touched her shoulder and asked, “Are you all right?”

A little smile in the red streaming face, a little nod, my courage returned.

“The vet did fine,” I said. “It was quick.”

Then she talked about it. Tentatively at first, with her mind working behind her tears as it had been working in the vet hospital. It bothered her a lot that Badger had struggled at the end. She had had in her mind that it would be peaceful, that the old dog would look lovingly into her face and fade into bliss. Instead, Esta was building the myth that Badger had fought against death. Now, I am definitely one of those people who attribute sense and reason to other species, but as I saw that dog struggle, it seemed to me that she was instructing us to leave her leg alone.

“She hates to have her legs messed with.” Esta conceded.

I noticed the tense was wrong but I appreciated the effort. “All we have to worry about now is you,” I told her several times.

As we fed the chickens and horses, we talked some more. She told her friend Ruth about it. Ruth had just put her sick dog away a few weeks before. “It’ll come and go for a few days. The first two days are the worst. After a week or two, it’s quite bearable,” she said.

I talked with Ruth a bit while Esta grained and brushed her horse and pony.

“Jane!” Her voice called me with urgent intensity sounding like those voices that sometimes call me in my dreams. I rushed to her end of the barn and followed her with the basket while she shoveled up the day’s collection of manure for the heap out back. “I think I want to bury her. What do you think?”

“Good idea,” I said. “A ritual to soothe you. I think that would be fine.”

So we drove back to the vet hospital from which we had fled, discussing the merits of ritual, the question of whether the ground could be dug, the various possibilities of where to bury the old dog, the necessary depth, whether to do the traditional back yard grave or whether we should try it in the mountains. “We could do it in the mountains if we could find a moist spot,” I said.

She mulled that over, wondering about polluting the streams, finally deciding on the backyard. When we got to the vet hospital, the vet tried to persuade her to have the dog cremated. She considered it, was confused, and decided we should dig a hole to see if we could before picking up the body. Esta was very squeamish about the body. We went then without it to her back yard and she chose the place where the old fence posts were stacked. She asked if I wanted them and we stacked them neatly in my car until it wouldn’t hold any more, then we put the rest in another place in the yard.

The dirt looked dry and hard. My shovel barely cut the surface. I told Esta to run the hose in a trickle in that spot and then the digging was quite possible. We worked away then, piling a mound of dirt on the grass. Two feet, the vet had said.

There was something healing in that digging and yet at the same time a threat of the morbid crept in. We estimated the size of the dog in relation to the size of the hole and decided the dog needed more space for her legs. “Okay,” I said, backing up against the fence, “We’ll give her some legroom.”

“Legroom!” Esta started to laugh then cried with her laughter. It was good. We dug some more. I slipped on the wet edge of the hole and almost fell in. More laughter, mixed with

more tears. I tried to cool it, as I could see Esta was on the edge of hysteria but I also knew there was a real need to lighten her mood.

Water was now forming a pool in the hole. “Maybe we should plant a tree instead and have her cremated.” she pondered.

I was agreeable. We put down our shovels and walked briskly through the darkening streets. It was not the path we had taken with the old dog earlier in the day.

She had the night in which to make the decision about whether to have Badger’s body cremated and if so, what to do about the hole gaping now by the back gate with water still gleaming at the bottom. We decided to call each other first thing in the morning and I drove away, thinking over the situation.

The dog had been taken care of. There was no more that Badger wanted or needed. All that was left to do was to straighten Esta’s head — which I stressed to her several times.

Guilt seemed to be the biggest problem. As I watched her and helped her as I could, I marveled at her creating and partaking of rituals. No expense was to be spared. She seemed to welcome and be attracted to expense. She emptied her checking account with determination and relief.

Another problem besides guilt was the creepy feeling about death that came and went, the morbid gruesomeness that ate away at her face and posture. I had been present at the death of the dog too but aside from worry and sadness for my friend and some response to her emotions, I was outside, looking in at her vision of death obsessing and pervading life.

The next morning, she called me at seven and I was down there in a couple of hours. Esta looked pretty bad but she

was holding up and determined to carry on with whatever ritual seemed right to her. She had decided on the private cremation — the most expensive solution — so we went to get a tree for the hole.

She finally settled on a chokecherry tree about eight feet tall, loaded with flower buds and little new leaves. We drove it to her backyard where we placed it gently beside the hole, then went to the farm for some composted manure to put around it. I shoveled the manure into bags while Esta cared for her horses and her chickens. The sun shone as we carefully planted the chokecherry tree in the hole we had dug for Badger.

She had decided on the chokecherry characteristically because since the birds like it and the people don't, it would never be a struggle over who should get the cherries.

A week later, I dropped by, ready for whatever might be presented to me. Esta still looked sad but she talked and laughed without any trouble, talking about Badger in the old days, about different breeds of dogs and their various merits. I wondered if she was considering getting a new dog. She said she had now got Badger's bones and was thinking of buying an aspen tree to bury them under. We mulled over the question of whether I could carry the tree in my car over the groceries and whatnot that I had accumulated in a day of shopping. She decided we should put it off, fearing the branches would be cramped and hurt, and we went on to the farm to feed and ride the horses for a bit.

I didn't get back there again for three more weeks. Esta had in the meantime kept Badger's bones beside her while she painted a painting called *The Majical Elk*. The bones were in a little copper-colored aluminum can on a low shelf. As the scene became clear to me, I wondered if we were going to bury that dog at all. I found myself for the first time being assertive with her, telling her that I was writing it all up and whatever she did

that day would end the story. Which shifted my character. She decided we should go to a distant tree nursery and look around.

It was a dark and gloomy day with a low cloud cover. We were the only customers in the place. We tripped around chattering and laughing. We looked at aspen trees and at mountain ash. I was surprised when she finally settled on a currant bush. We drove back on little dirt roads, stopping for a long while to watch a community of prairie dogs with their babies out foraging in a field.

The first hurdle when we got to her house was where to place the currant-bush-grave. After picking and rejecting half a dozen spots in the yard, we decided it should replace a hemlock shooting up by the side fence. We dug and tore at it but it finally bent the pitchfork so Esta pointed to a place further along the fence and I dug the hole while she went to get the little can of bones. Esta's white longhaired cat joined us elegantly on top of the fence.

The little copper-colored aluminum can seemed impossible to open. Esta struggled over it with a can opener, her face twisted in dread and repulsion. I suggested that she could bury can and all but she didn't want that. She wanted the bones to become part of the earth. I got a church key and, with Esta laughing hysterically watching me, slowly loosened the edge of the can, then handed it to her. She lifted the lid and looked inside. Her face turned pale. It had rattled and sure enough, it was burnt bones. She poured them with solemn distaste into the hole and put the currant bush on top. Across the little yard, the chokecherry we had planted the day after Badger's death was dropping its last flower-petals and starting to grow a profuse crop of cherries.

Between us and the little tree, the white cat washed herself.



LETTER FROM THE LANDLADY

Dear Phillip and family,

Well, people often say 'Wish you were here,' but I'm telling you, it couldn't be meant more than I mean it now. Nothing personal, you understand, but strong backs and willing work are what we need right now.

I guess you've heard about the flood down below us where the mud piled up in folks' houses a foot or two. That's the place got in the papers and on the news. Well here, we've got the mud piled up three to four feet in the houses, the phone and power lines been down three weeks now and I don't know when they'll come around and fix them.

I should tell you right now, dear, the house is gone. Even to those pretty flowered curtains your sweet wife put up in the windows, even the crayoning that darling little boy of yours did on the underside of the bathtub. Gone, all gone.

I'm staying here at my sister's place and trying to think what to do now. Old Shep got swept away, I guess. And the

chickens. And all my canning I had packed away in the basement. I can't tell you how much that hurts me still, more even than the house because I didn't build the house. But my canning was the pride and happiness of my life this year. I told you in my last letter how wonderfully my garden was doing. I'd never had such a garden before in my life. And I didn't waste any of it. I bought jars and lids and in the heat of autumn, I was constantly hovering over my cookstove canning and pickling and packing and paraffining and sterilizing and sealing every speck of food I grew out there. And it was going to feed me across the whole winter. Five hundred jars I had in the basement. All gone.

Here's how it happened to me. I was looking out the window at it, at the water flooding down the road. It was a few inches then. So I put on my big rubber boots (silliest waste of time. Almost as silly as doing five hundred jars of canning before a flood) and went out to see what I could do for the chickens. When I stepped out the door, the water was up to the top of my boots and when I got across the yard to the chickenhouse, it was up to my waist. This was the first time I gave a thought to myself. I never did learn how to swim when I was a kid, not very well, anyway. Didn't like the thought of the water moccasins. So I stood there holding onto the fence around the chickenyard and I guess I just stared at the poor chickens trying to swim. I didn't even see what happened to Shep. He was just gone.

I stood there clinging to that flimsy fence and the water rose to my armpits and the force of it was tremendous. It picked me up and then I thought I must be a goner as I went sailing across the yard. I remember thinking I was a goner and was surprised at how I thought about it. As I was thrashing in the push of the water, struggling hard for each breath, I was thinking about dying. I'd always heard that when one is dying, ones whole life ran through ones mind but that didn't happen to me. I was so busy watching myself thinking about dying as well as the big effort for each breath and big sense of success whenever I got one, that there was no time for nostalgia.

This didn't last long, though. Just when I'd decided I did want my old age, along the water swept me into that big paw-

paw tree down the alley and wedged me into it solid as a rock. I was sticking up out of the water from the waist up and couldn't have drowned if you'd paid me.

And for a while, I stuck there and I was as glad as I could be because I could just breathe then without all that fuss over each breath. And I stuck there in that pawpaw tree and looked around. There were all kinds of boards and roofs and dead chickens going by and it was getting dark. I could move my legs and I could move my arms but I could not un-wedge my hips out from the crotch of that tree. Well, I thought, I guessed I didn't want to but it was pretty cold and I was shivering and I thought if only I could have a shawl around my shoulders I'd be all right. And as soon as I thought that, along come a big sheet of clear plastic right into my arms! Well, I grabbed it and wrapped it like a shawl around my shoulders. Then, I hadn't considered how my hair was wet and my head was cold and I could still catch my death from the cold wind in this pawpaw tree if I didn't have a cover for my head. And just as I had that thought, along came one of the gas lamps from Mrs. Clurvy's dining room ceiling and I snatched it out of the water and it just fitted over my head.

By this time, it was pretty near dark and I knew I was going to spend the night in that tree. And I knew that the cold of the water was already numbing my legs and that by morning I'd still be either dead or paralyzed if I couldn't get my legs out of the water. With my lamp on my head and my plastic shawl tucked into my belt, I struggled to get unstuck from that tree but there seemed no way for it. Suddenly, above the roar of wind and wave, I heard a tearing sound and along come my own garage, dancing toward me through the dark. I was pretty scared, you can imagine. I remember thinking I'd been asking for too much and the good Lord got mad at me. But instead, the garage came right over to me and slowly, seeming to me with solicitous caution, PUSHED OPEN THE CROTCH I was wedged in, got solidly wedged itself, and sat there just ordering me to climb up on the roof and dry off.

You can imagine I didn't wait for a second invitation. I pulled myself up onto that roof and I lay there all night long. I would never say it was the height of comfort but when one is

teetering along the fence between life and death, one perhaps doesn't think of comfort. I can tell you, I didn't sleep. I sat there watching shapes go by, it was too dark now to see what they were. And the only other thing I asked for now was that my garage would stay wedged in my pawpaw tree and that I would be rescued in the morning.

Well, it did and I was, by helicopter. I never was so glad to see anything as I was to see that helicopter, though we're all getting heartily sick of the buzzers now, excuse my French, and I'll tell you why. People all over the country want to feel like they did something for us so they send us their old clothes. And they're all dropped by helicopter at the fire station. And the fire station doesn't know what to do with them all and finally burns them with the rest of the debris. And wouldn't you know it, just as they're burning one batch, along comes another helicopter and dumps another load.

What we need, of course, is for people to come in and shovel the mud out of the houses that still stand. Three to four feet deep, as I said, in basements and kitchens and living rooms. All kinds of things to worry about, wiring and propane and whether they're going to dig up any dead bodies. Old Mr. Plugg is missing and one of the Slater kids. Somebody might be taking care of them somewhere else, of course. People are all in the wrong places still.

They're talking about rebuilding the town but my sister has a lot next door here on higher ground. And in the back of that lot is a big lovely pawpaw tree I'd really like to own. I climbed up into it yesterday, middle-aged as I am. I'd like to live near a pawpaw tree.

Your old landlady,
Mabelle Sweetwater



A LIFE

“Ven I vas wery liddle my brozer took me to ride on his bicycle. My brozer vas nine years older zan me und I loffed him more zan anyvon. He vas wery special. Eferybody loffed him who knew him. Von day he took me on his bicycle und ve rode out und out in ze country mit trees und fields und houses going by, streams und flowers und hills und forests, places I had nefer seen before und had no idea dey vere dere. It vas fery great esperience for me.

“Ven I vas maybe sefen years old, my fazer showed me paintings in a book, Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Dürer, many paintings. I vas fery nervous child but ven I looked at zose pictures I vas qviet, I looked und looked into zose pictures in a book und I vas amazed. How can I say it? I saw dem. Und it changed eferysing. My family didn’t understand, I vas so still und I stared und stared at ze pictures in a book.

“Ven I vas nine, I vas in school; ve had big contest in ze boys toilet — dis vas unofficial contest you understand — who could piss ze highest on ze vall, und I, Jorgen Boettcher, I vas ze wictor! Wery high up on ze vall of ze toilet vas a vindow und I vent in dere viz my friend und I pissed out ze vindow. Vat ve didn’t know vas dat ze teacher vas standing under ze vindow

und my piss landed on him! So he came to ze toilet und Bom! Biff! But I vas ze victor!

“Den I vas hafing trouble viz my tees, I haf always trouble viz my tees. My mozer vas wery seek und my fazer vas out of vork und I had trouble viz my tees. So my mozer took me to a doctor und got pills so I vud not poison myself viz my bad tees. I remember her wery solemnly telling me zat ze pills vud turn my piss red und I vas not to be afraid, it vas only ze pills. So I vent to school und I told my friends I could piss red und dey didn’t belief me so I took dem out in ze voods, dere vere twenty or sirty of dem. It vas vinter and ze snow vas wery vite eferyvere. Und I pissed, und my piss vas red on ze vite snow. Dey could not belief it; all deir faces turned vite like ze snow. Dey could not understand how I did dat.

“Ven I vas elefen, Ze Var came to Heuboden und all ze young men vere taken into it und I saw my brozer, my great brozer I loffed so much, I saw him dead. Dis vas ze first person I haf efer seen dead and it vas my great brozer. After dat I saw many people dead, Russians, Germans, hundreds I saw dead in ze next two or sree years but ze first von I saw vas my brozer. It vas wery terrible. Ven I vas tvelf or sixteen, dere vas boy from our willage, he vas fifteen, his name vas Franz, dey vere taking ze boys younger and younger. It happened dat he vas among ze soldiers who vere fighting near our willage und dey captured him und brought him to ze center of ze willage and made us all be dere ven dey shot him. Dey shot Franz in front of ze whole willage dat he grew up in, his family und all his friends und I vas, I vas, how can I say, ve vere all hurt so bad. So you can see vy Bertold Brecht can be so important to me and to all ze German people.

“Later on, ze town vas lefeled, my lovely town of Heuboden vas lefeled, ze place vere I grew up und seldom vas away from, it vas lefel mid de ground, not von house vas standing, nossing. Most of us vere dead or gone away but I vas liffig dere. My mozer vas dead. My fazer und I, ve liffig in ze basement of our home because ze house vas gone escept for ze basement, all ze houses vere gone und ze people of ze willage dat vere left all liffig in ze basements. Dere vas wery liddle food und much sorrow und Ze Var going on around us.

“I am not photographer, I am painter. My photographs, I photograph sings for ze government, sings as dey should be, but I am not photographer, I am painter. Ze government does not let me be official artist. But it is not so bad. I haff vife und liddle girl, I haff friends and ve haff fun. Efery day laffing. I made a show of my paintings in my home last year, many many people came efen doe I vas not allowed to put any notices about it in ze newspaper. My name is so common in Germany dat dere are sefen ozer Boettchers painting now, fairly well-known, so I do not sign my vork vis my name but I sign it Heuboden, ze name of my beloved childhood town.

“Ven I came here to Amsterdam, it is my first trip, first time in my life on dis side of De Vall und ven I came here, ze customs officials treated me wery bad. I sink dey don’t like Germans maybe especially from ze East Side. Dey kept me sitting in room for hours, I didn’t know If I vas in Var or in hell or prison. Finally I said to dem, I said, ‘I am not spy, I am not politician, I am not criminal. I am artist! Dere is no need to vorry about me!’ So den dey let me go.”



DRIVING UP THROUGH MEXICO

“The divorce papers reached me at Rico’s. I had thought that I was fully recovered. Rico said when he saw that thick envelope, he knew it was something bad and he had considered refusing it but then he didn’t. And there they were, those papers, and the whole thing swept over me again. The doctor up home had said, ‘You need to get away, you need perspective.’ I had asked my wife then, ‘Will you go with me?’ She at least could speak Spanish. But that man that she later married had been sitting there at the table with us when I asked her that and she had looked at him and then she had looked back at me and said, ‘No.’ That look she gave him I’ll never forget. It haunted me the whole four months I was down there.

“The time there was good, it was great in fact but that’s another story entirely, another world.

“When I got those papers, I left Rico’s place and went crazy. I could feel it coming over me like a rope around my

chest, my arms, pulling my senses away from the world I had learned was what they call 'reality.' It pulled my innards awry, sped up my heart, my breath. I was carried off into a field of forces beyond my control. Madness, anyone might call it, or artist's temperament. It's here, in the depths of the soul, where we artists do our work. Call it the fetal reality if you like, that sense of place a fetus has, the vulnerability, open to powers greater by far than can be recognized in 'reality.' It is in essence a religious frenzy, a possession, a conversation with angels. Artists take their instructions from angels. It has to be so. If we can't connect with them, we cannot work.

"There are problems of course. When I'm open, it isn't only the angels who want in. Demons come. I know them for what they are; I know they're not angels. So why did I let them in? I'll tell you why. It's because that's where I live, working with whatever forces come, searching out the depths and putting into a form the instructions they give, whatever they are.

"It was at the very beginning that I made the wrong turn. I should have made it into a painting but I didn't. I felt such a sense of unbearable failure in my life that she would leave me and take away the kids. My own wishes, my sense of justice, my personal desires overwhelmed the possibility that this should be channeled into a painting. And what a painting it would have been. It would have been demonically powerful, exploding with vibrant pain. It would have brought the anguish of Bosch and Goya into the Twentieth Century. It could have changed history. But the thought of stretching canvas and dipping my brush in the paint never crossed my mind.

"Two Canadian painters, nice young guys, lived in the Capitol village of a small and poor state and they had asked me to visit them on the way home.

"I had to call her. It got in my mind to call her and I had to do it. I went to the Canadians' place but I had only forty dollars left and thought I should call collect. To do that, I had to

go to the Telephone Company so I went there. It was in a corner of a ramshackle hut where a few groceries were sold. I knew how to say, 'Reverse the charges,' in Spanish and I remember distinctly I did say it and I heard the operator asking my wife if she would accept the call. And I heard my wife's voice accept the charges and we talked. Nothing was achieved talking with her; she still wanted a divorce. When I hung up, the lady in the telephone office wanted me to pay her. I had my forty dollars in my shoe and a few pesos in my wallet and I was not going to take off my shoe and pay her. And I had reversed the charges. She didn't know English and I didn't know Spanish. I said the Spanish for 'Reverse the charges,' several times, that was all I could do. And I walked out. Never realizing until later that she must have had a buzzer system with the Police station, that her hands hidden under the counter were calling them, as she seemed to be accepting what I said.

"I hadn't walked a block when two big muscular country goons in police uniforms grabbed me and started hauling me down the street.

"The two Canadians happened to be passing by across the street and they shouted at me, 'You mustn't go to a Mexican jail. The last American that went into a Mexican jail came out so beaten his head swelled to twice normal size.'

"'Don't take this away from me,' I heard myself saying, 'I don't owe them anything.'

"'Pay anyway,' they said.

"'I'd be broke then,' I said.

"'We'll pay it,' they said.

"'Keep out of this,' I growled at them. 'I can handle it.'

"I have my pride. And I had justice on my side. No way was I going to pay. I had reversed the charges.

"The goons hauled me to the jailhouse, took away my wallet and my belt and the Swiss army knife I had just bought and some other things I had in my pockets. Then they dragged me down a long dank corridor, rock walls, to a cell, and shoved me in. And the door clanged to behind me.

"I was not alone.

"The cell was smelly and dark. The walls were of rock. A few inches above the floor along one wall was an open sewer, damp. But the smell didn't arise from there so much as from the five men who faced me. Three of them looked to be Chinese, the other two Mexican. There seemed no humanity in their eyes at all but only a predatory glitter. They clustered around me like a madman's nightmare. I backed up against the wall. Their hands felt at my pockets, poked and prodded. They took my clothes off of me, all but my shorts and my shoes. Then I was dressed as they were. I tried to connect with them, control them with my eyes, very often I can do that, relate to people with my eyes but they looked at me with no recognition of me as a sentient being at all. They took my watch off my wrist, my rings off my fingers; they jabbed me, spat upon me. One of them hauled out his dick and pissed onto my leg. I knew enough then not to start swinging. I'm a strong enough man and I don't mind a good fight, I like a good fight. But raising a fist in that cell would have been certain death in less than a minute. As long as I had hope, I would not fight. But even then, even if I did not fight, I knew I would die there within a few hours. I pressed my back against the wall and held my arms in front of me as these monsters covered me with shit and filth and I added the smell of my fear to all the smells that filled the cell. A pain shot through me from my back. My cellmates momentarily moved away from me looking at the things that they'd taken from me. I reached a hand around to feel the source of the pain. A lump, hot to the touch and tender but not

a bruise. They hadn't hit me on the back. Tension, nothing but nerves. Sweat was pouring down me mingling with the urine on my leg. I was trembling too and breathing in quick gasps. All of which I tried to hide from them.

"Two hours I was in that cell. How I survived two hours of it and what all occurred, I can't say. At some time in there, the diarrhea began. I don't remember it happening. It's quite plausible that I didn't even notice it when it happened.

"Then came the moment when from fear, tension, exhaustion, loss of hope, I was blacking out. My vision narrowed to out—of—focus wavering. Three of my cellmates came toward me with little ugly smiles of satisfaction on their faces. Soon I would fall and all would be over. As a last effort to keep alive then, I braced my back against the slimy wall and lashed out at two of their chins with the heels of my hands, throwing their heads back. I would die fighting. Why not. Vaguely through the cell door I heard sounds of footsteps. Leaving the safety of my wall, I swung at the third.

"I remember the cell door opening, uniformed arms pulling me out. 'My watch!' I said, 'My rings!' But the arms pulled me on down the corridor and I came out squinting, filthy, stinking, my shorts shamefully stained with diarrhea, into rooms with bare bulbs and dingy walls of painted wood. There was a man there in a dressing gown, his hair unkempt, standing, his arms crossed on his chest and I glowered at him. They gave me back my belt and my wallet with the few pesos that were in it removed. 'I had a knife,' I said. 'We have no knife,' they said and they glared at me. I thought of the cell at the end of the corridor and I shut my mouth. The lump on my back sent flashes of pain to my neck and my gut. I shut my mouth and stumbled out into darkness.

"My two Canadian friends were on the steps waiting for me. They told me about the man in the dressing gown and the unkempt hair, the one that I had glowered at; they told me he

was the governor of the state. They had roused him out of sleep to save me and he had come and had saved me. I turned to go back and thank him but the Canadians started to pull me away and when I looked at the door, the trembling came back to me and I turned again and went with them.

“I spent the rest of the night cleaning myself.

“I still had my forty dollars safe in my shoe. When I woke and reached for my clothes there was a scorpion, his curled tail pointed at me. It was too much. I screamed. One of the Canadians was just waking up too and he smashed the scorpion under his heel and it splattered all over everything.

“I left early.

“Miles and miles I drove and did not stop except to get gas and to have my diarrhea. My back hurt where the lump pressed against the seat. I felt as though demons wore everywhere. My hands kept sweating on the steering wheel. I checked the rear—view mirror often and when I saw a car behind me, I’d speed up. At last I came to a river and there was no bridge, no ferry, nothing but some kids there to guide me across the river. It was a fairly wide river, wide and, where the road came up to it, shallow, a ford. But on either side, invisible to me driving the car, it was deeper, and here and there were sharp rocks, sharp enough to cut through tires. One of the kids jumped onto the hood of my car, his back to me, and guided me across, waving his hands this way and that to show me which way to steer. I gave him a quarter on the other side, an immense amount of money to him.

“I went to a restaurant then and sagged into a chair, ordered a meal and was eating it wearily when a red-faced Texan came up to me. He said he had bunged up a tire at the river crossing and wanted to borrow my spare till a little town outside of Guadalajara and he gave me the address where he’d

be. He shook my hand when I lent him my spare tire. I drove on to the address he gave me and I told the man there I was expecting this Texan with my tire and when the Texan didn't come, the man gave me a bed to sleep in.

"I slept, too. I slept into the morning and when I woke, the Texan still hadn't arrived with my tire so I put on my swimming trunks and went down to the beach. It was an overcast day. The dim circle of the sun seemed to pull the clouds into triangles and diamonds around itself as it crept slowly across the sky. It never came out from behind those clouds but stayed always hidden like a fan dancer hides her naked body behind her fans. There was a little breeze off the ocean and there were some kids down there and I started playing with those kids. I knew the demons were still there, I could still feel the rope brushing my face, my chest, my back. Once in awhile I would have to run behind a rock for my diarrhea. The lump was still there on my back and now and again it tingled and I'd look up to see if anyone was after me but I saw no one.

"Those kids and I had the grandest time, wandering along the ocean, picking up shells, building sand castles. I've always known how to get along with kids. Kids always trust me. They know I'm all right.

"She was taking my kids away from me.

"It was late in the day now. The kids all had to go home. The tide was coming in to sweep away our sand castle. I got to my feet and swayed. I felt sick. Somehow I staggered back to that house and the man gasped at the sight of me. I had an awful case of sunburn. He had to call in a doctor who had been a doctor for the American Navy during the war and for four days I lay there in that house. It was very bad. I'm sure that doctor and the hospitality of that man saved my life. It had been overcast all day but I had a sunburn that nearly killed me. I was still having the diarrhea. The doctor checked it out and

said it was psychosomatic. He tried to stop it with medicines but he couldn't. I kept on having it. It became my closest companion.

"That Texan never showed up with my tire.

"The lump on my back went away after the third day.

"I drove on into Guadalajara. The rage came over me suddenly and the fear. I found a big boulevard and I was driving along that, four lanes with an island in the middle, big palm trees growing in the island and kids all over it, playing, noisy like city kids are, yelling and jumping and running. I slowed to a respectable speed. I looked into the rear—view mirror and saw a car behind me with three women in it. And when I looked back at the road, there was a kid running out in front of me. I swerved to the right lane as I was slamming on the brakes. Thank God my brakes were good. The car shrieked to a stop but just that last jerk as the car swayed on its wheels got hit, I heard the thud and he fell. I leaped out of my car, I was quivering all over but I moved very fast. He was lying on the road, he was about my eldest daughter's age, seven and a half, and for a moment he looked at me with big brown eyes like my eldest daughter's eyes and then he passed out. I knelt beside him and stared at him and the misery was all through me. I heard a man say to me, 'Go! Run away! Get lost! I'll take care of it!' I didn't even look up. I couldn't have even stood up then, let alone run away. If I had tried to run, they would have shot me down. I wanted to stay with the kid; I wanted to make that kid be all right.

"The three women in the car behind me turned out by a miracle to be American nurses. They checked the kid over and said he seemed like he would be all right. They followed the police as they hauled me off to be interrogated. Those nurses were amazing. They weren't the sweet and beautiful nurses of my dreams, they were all three fat and stumpy, cheerful, knowledgeable and determined.

“I didn’t know what to make of them. They followed me into the police station and demanded that I be treated in a civilized fashion. I was ready to die. If I had been put in a cell then, I would have died as the door clanged shut. The three nurses followed me everywhere through the police station. The police wanted to put me in a cell and the nurses said no, they couldn’t put me in a cell, I hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Women in Mexico never acted like they were acting. When I had arrived in Mexico City, lost, trying to find the street where my friends were, I had asked an efficient-looking, well-dressed woman where that street was and she had said, ‘I can’t talk to you.’ Women in Mexico all kept their eyes on the ground, said ‘Si,’ and did what they were told. The police were helpless against those three nurses. They demanded I be allowed to call the American Consulate. I was given a phone book and I called the American Consulate. But the Consul was at a party. I asked for the number at the party but they said they didn’t know. I knew they were lying. I hung up the phone. I knew I was dead now. The only way I could keep out of that cell was under the care of a Guadalajara resident. The three nurses stood in a row, their chins out, and demanded another phone call. Finally the police relented. ‘One more call, only one,’ they said. I opened the phone book again and looked at the names. They were all Spanish names, pages and pages of Spanish names and no clue anywhere of kindness to Americans or even English language. My eyes skittered down all their names as I turned the pages. At last, I came to Schultz. As far as I could see, he was my only hope. I called him.

“He was American. I told him I was in trouble. I told him I had called the American Consul. ‘I bet he’s at a party,’ said Schultz. And then I knew I was saved.

“Schultz turned out to be an important man. He was the Guadalajara representative of the Ford Motor Company. He came down to get me out as soon as he could. The police said I would have to pay for the kid’s medical bills. I said I would.

They said they would have to hold my car until it was all over. But the nurses objected to that. Everything I had was in that car, they said, clothes, sleeping bag, paints. I needed it. Schultz was vouching for me and that was enough. The police gave me my car. And Schultz gave me another spare tire.

“I had to stay there four days and those nurses stood by me the whole time. The kid recovered with no problems but there was court and there was red tape and there were constant threats. The nurses never let the bureaucracy hurt me. They’d stand in a row and say, ‘No,’ chins forward, eyes bold and no one could face them.

“And gradually across those four days, in spite of officialdom, I recovered my control. Gradually the demons faded away like a nightmare fades across a day. The diarrhea went away last and left me weak and thin, thinner than I’ve ever been. It cleaned me out practically down to the bone.

“Those three nurses saved my life. Schultz too. The man who took care of me back by the river where I got the sunburn. The doctor he brought to me. The two Canadian painters who got me out of jail and the governor of the state in his dressing gown with his hair unkempt as he had come to save me straight from sleep.

“I must be worth saving, I thought, but it wasn’t like a thought, it was like water in a drought, like breath when you’re drowning. Those nine people came around me like angels protecting me.

“Sometimes, afterwards, I wondered if I had fooled them. The painting I might have made would never be made.

“The rest of the trip was uneventful except for the big

question of whether I had enough money to buy the gas to get me back, which I barely did. I knew that when I got home I would be in Hell for some long time but I could face it now. I was in control.

“I was worth saving.”



Fiction

\$12.00

Jane Wodening's stories are sad and grotesque and powerful.

Kurosawa said, "To be an artist means never having to avert one's eyes." Jane Wodening doesn't blink.

From the Preface by Lucia Berlin

Poets "Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress." - W. H. Auden

The unsuccess of Jane Wodening's characters is not always human. The marvelous world of the Book of Gargoyles, like the marvelous world we normally live in but don't pay much attention to, has room for a stoic beetle and for swimming chickens. Coyotes listen to dying prey and white cats solemnly observe burials.

But most of this rapture is human and it is indeed sung. These stories are not so much narrated as voiced. Artists, cowboys, mothers, landladies, even, perhaps, the author—all tell their stories, each in his own impeccably individualized words and rhythms. It is the songs that move us. Often, the point is the telling, itself, the circling, re-circling of word and rhythm that adds to a layer of truth that went before, or strips it bare... These characters still commonly explain their lives in language more apt than they know, in words that resonate beyond their world.

A writer in the book asks, "If it can't be put into words, did anything happen?" A great deal happens in the Book of Gargoyles. Jane Wodening has the words.

Phil Rowe

"You can read Jane Wodening for the grace of the prose, the details of the knowledge, her genius for story, or for her unhesitant focus on the truth of the time-track. She's good at it, and her moment is right here.

Ed Sanders

Baksun/Grackle

ISBN #1-887997-14-8